

THE HUSTLER ROGUE-CATCHER!



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Poker Pete's Double Dodge; or, The Close Call.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "FLIP-FLOP FRED," "THE HUSTLER ROGUE-CATCHER," ETC., ETC.



THE ROAD-BANDIT SMILED LIKE A FIEND AS HE WATCHED THE LIGHTED FUSE.

Poker Pete's Double Dodge;

OR,

THE MIGHTY CLOSE CALL.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "FLIP-FLOP FRED," "FARO FRANK," "THE HUSTLER ROGUE-CATCHER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEVEE AT PAY DIRT.

THE mines around Pay Dirt had been panning out well, but the town was isolated to a great extent from the outside world, and its citizens had been forced to league together for their own protection.

As yet there were no banking and Express facilities provided by corporations, and so they banded together to look after their own interests. There was a strongly built cabin under the care of one Sailor Sam, and assistants, in which individuals deposited their clean-ups, and eventually the accumulated treasure was sent out at irregular periods under a guard of trustworthy men, who never let it get out of their sight until receipted for by the nearest Express agency.

So far, they had been able to protect their treasures, though the outlaws who trained under the lead of one "Captain Kill" had made more than one attempt to gather in the spoils.

After more than one fierce assault on the storehouse had been brought to naught—mainly through the pluck and wit of two boys who had apparently by chance stumbled upon the camp—it seemed to the people of Pay Dirt as if the band of Captain Kill had been well-nigh annihilated, and that further danger from him and his road-raiders was no longer to be feared.

As the town had been badly damaged through the breaking up of a dam in the mountains above Pay Dirt which had been purposely wrecked by the road-agents, there was delay in starting out the treasure, since the men who were to act as the treasure-guards had to repair their cabins, or assist others in that work, before leaving.

No great anxiety was felt, now, however; and under the watchful care of Sailor Sam, the keeper of the general treasure storehouse, no one doubted but that the gold was safe enough, there.

Several of the treasure-owners, however, were impatient of this delay, and to end it they themselves proposed to go in the coach which was to carry the treasure-boxes.

This Captain Kill had posed under several names while an unsuspected resident of the camp, and in truth had other schemes besides the gathering in of the treasure of the storehouse, for with astonishing audacity and cunning he had held as his prisoners one Ezra Ford, and his daughter Helen, together with one Harker Hazen, who was the accepted lover of the young lady.

This Ezra Ford had long suffered under the imputation of a crime, and had been a willing as well as a fearing exile—all to save a brother's honor, but that brother at the date of this story being dead, Ezra was anxious to return and claim the name and fortune awaiting him in the East, and where he went Hark Hazen was anxious to follow.

So much by way of introduction. The day came finally around when the treasure-coach was to leave Pay Dirt, and well-nigh the whole population turned out to see it start.

Sailor Sam, the treasure-house storekeeper, was in command of the guard with the treasure, and a man by the name of Hank Henry was second in authority. The four or five others going out with the coach were all men who had been at Pay Dirt from the first, and every one who had an interest in the treasure felt perfectly sure that all could be trusted.

Among those gathered to see the coach start were the two boys referred to, who had gained the camp sobriquet of "Hustler Rogue-Catchers" for their keenness and efficiency in helping to wipe out the gang of Captain Kill.

After that event they had been virtually voted the liberty of the town, and so had there remained to see what new developments might again require their services—the one popularly named "Little Clean Grit" being clearly of the opinion that the bad men of the discomfited gang would be heard from again, under some leadership.

"Good-by, Miss Helen," said Clean Grit, who was there with the rest.

"Looks as though it would all be plain sailing now, but you can't most always sometimes tell. If anything turns up there's enough to pull you through all right; and if they don't you can just look to see Michael and me booming along on the trail before it has time to get cold. So long! Perhaps I'll see you later, after all."

"Better come with us now," answered the young lady, somewhat impressed by the warning, though it would have seemed ridiculous to one who was not posted on what this brave lad had already done in the way of running in the bad men of camp and stage trail.

"Thankee all the same, but it's not in the wood. Looks as though we may find a contract here. Don't care about leaving till we find out, anyhow," declared the young rough-and-ready camp-watcher.

"But have you any reason to fear an attack on us?" asked the young lady anxiously.

"Not a bit, except that it would be worth some agent's while to make it if he could pull through. There's a heap-sight of wealth about the outfit, and there's a heap-sight of folks know it, too, so it would not be at all strange if the coach was called."

"But, Kill is dead; and his was the only band of agents known to flourish in this section," she insisted.

"Don't be too sure about either of those facts. They are what we are hoping for, but— They are starting now. Don't fret yourself, miss. It will all come right. Good-by!"

Amid a chorus of shouts from the throng the coach rolled away, part of the selected guard being on the top of "the hearse" and others riding on horseback.

With the disappearance of the coach the young camp spy expected to see the crowd melt away, to return to the regular duties of the day.

Instead of that there was a movement which he did not exactly understand, though he saw it brought him and Mike his plucky boy comrade into the center of the throng.

Then, Ralph Dixon, who had lately been appointed to the position of town marshal, suddenly thrust out his hands, each finding a resting-place on a shoulder of the trusty boy pards.

"Excuse us, young gents, but Pay Dirt has a word to say to you, and it would have been said a little bit sooner if it had not been that Ezra Ford wanted time to get out of the way. He didn't want to hear it, but he told us what he thought he ought to say, and it was just what we were thinking of ourselves. Any objections?"

"None that I'm aware of. It's mighty mean when a party can't have a chance to talk if they have anything to say. If it sounds nice we'll listen to you, too. If it don't—well, you'll be running your chances."

Clean Grit dropped his hand till his fingers touched the revolver at his hip, yet the action was not a threat.

Although he was puzzled to know exactly what was coming he felt he could afford to smile. He had been a friend to Pay Dirt when Pay Dirt needed a friend,

and did not expect to hear any unpleasant remarks now.

"Histe yerself a bit, Dixon!" shouted some one in the crowd.

"Jest wait tell we roll out a box er two, an' we kin hear some, an' see a blamed sight better."

The suggestion was well received if the roar of assent could be taken for approval. In a minute a store box was tumbled forward, and it was large enough for the two boys to have plenty of room for footing, though the marshal stood on a level with the crowd.

"Now, little ones, what we have to say won't be apt to make you very tired, unless you are a blame sight more modest than I reckon. You have been doing Pay Dirt some favors, and Pay Dirt means to do herself proud in following suit. She just hands this little sack over to your keeping, and says, 'Take it and be happy.' Guess such pards as you will know how to divide it."

Above the heads of the crowd rose Ralph Dixon's hand, and it held up to view the article which he spoke of, and it seemed to be well filled.

For a moment the boy hustler hesitated; but, it was not for long.

"Gents, all! I won't say that Pard Mike and I are down to bed rock; but we were just thinking of looking around for a place and a chance to make a little of the needful. What we did we did for the benefit of this hyer community, and not for ourselves, but if it's so that some of our departed friends have chipped liberal, and that this is an offering of good will, I reckon we would be foolish to throw dirt on the town and its feelings. It will come in handy if we have to get a sudden move on, and it may do more good to this camp than you are thinking just at the present time. Michael and I return our sincere thanks, and scoop the boodle without a kick. Yours truly; and no more at present."

It was not much of a speech, but it was full of solid sense according to the ideas of Pay Dirt, and was received with as much applause as if it had been twice as long, and a great deal more flowery.

Then, everybody began to press forward with extended hands, and there was a shaking that seemed as though it was never to come to an end.

The shaking was done cordially, however, and with much laughter—Clean Grit and his always-on-guard pard took one paw after another, understanding the reception would soon be over. Through it all Dixon stood by the side of the young camp waifs, acting as master of ceremonies, though there was little occasion for him to say or do anything.

At last the crowd seemed ready to disperse. Some of the men, in fact, were strolling away, and the boys were plainly visible from every side.

They still stood upon the box, but Little Clean Grit had just extended one foot with the idea of stepping down to the ground, when, "Crack!"

From somewhere near there came the report of a pistol, and it was only the sudden lurch of the young hustler that saved him. As it was, the bullet cut a line across the back of his coat, near to his neck, and as he stumbled forward some thought he was falling from the shot.

If he fell it was only to rise again, and revolver in hand he peered keenly among the crowd, in the direction whence the bullet seemed to have come.

CHAPTER II.

OFF ON THE TRAIL.

FOR the moment which followed the shot the men of Pay Dirt were motionless through amazement. That any one would dare fire a shot at the boy who had done them such

brave service, and whom they were all de-lighting to honor, was almost beyond belief. Yet, they had the evidences of their senses, and it did not take them long to get ready for action.

With howls of wrath half a dozen men sprung toward the spot from which they believed the bullet had been sent; but none had actually seen the weapon discharged, and though a close search was made no man who was not above suspicion could be found.

There was running this way and that, and excited questions, followed by answers of the same kind, but that was all; and young Clean Grit himself succeeded no better. All he knew was that he had been made a target of, and that it was a close call indeed.

Was it an accident? or, had they an implacable and secret enemy?

When it was found that all search was vain, the spot was gradually deserted, and after a little the two young hustlers slipped away, where they could have a conversation over what to most persons seemed to be a singular thing.

"Well, cully, what do yer think of it?" asked Mike, after a cautious glance around to make sure there was no one within hearing distance.

"Wasn't he an out an' outer, an' no mistake? I might have tried a snap at him, but I couldn't bear to send such a game cove to cash in on the very first deal."

"What! You saw the fellow who fired?"

"Bet yer sweet life I just did!" averred Mike.

"Who was it? What did he look like?"

"Can't prove it by me. Never see him afore, an' he was jest the ordinary lookin' feller. One second I had him down fine, an' my thumb was on the hammer, but I didn't pull. Then, the next second he was gone, an' I was wishin' I had."

For a minute Clean Grit silently brooded over what he had heard. Then, he roused himself after the fashion of one who had made up his mind to an unexpected and unpleasant fact.

"Mike!"

"Fire ahead, pard! Mike's listenin'."

"Do you know I'm not sure—not just dead sure—that Captain Kill and all his gang went up in the tunnel?"

"Begins to look that way, but I reckon you're not scart. I ain't."

"Come now, you know I'm not, either. But, if Kill is still loose, and ready for the rampage, he would be just the nerry sort to try to throw me cold with all Pay Dirt looking on; that's his style."

"Just the hairpin he is, prezactly."

"And if he has his old gang behind him, or enough of it to make it count, I should remark that he's not the fellow to give up on the treasure outfit that's just gone out. There will be a circus before they get through to the Flat, and it strikes me we ought to be in the ring."

"My platform to a charm, Pard Grit! But, you're runnin' things. Prehaps Sailor Sam ain't as big a fool as he looks; an' Hank Henry may know beans."

"Which means?"

"What you want to make out of it; but I'm bettin' that when the music strikes up it'll find Sam an' his crowd ready fur ther grand entrance."

"Guess you're right on that, but still, that will be where the fun goes on, and that's the place we want to be camping. Mighty lucky thing, this grand presentation. I don't suppose it would have hurt your feelings much to borrow a horse when the owner was out of town, but it might break that reformation of yours all up; and I wouldn't have been in it at all."

"Sooner padded the hoof, would you? Guess I'd rather try a prance, an' if there's any in the market we'll own a pair of them on the square. We're nabobs, now—we are,

I'm not much on the ride myself, but you can hold on for both of us."

"And the sooner we get on the trail the better. Guess Dixon will be as likely as any one to know if there's any live stock of the kind we want in the market. If we have to, guess we can give him a hint of what we think is in the wind."

No further plans could be laid until they knew more of the situation, but once having made up their minds to this much they were ready for a beginning.

They found Dixon without trouble, and briefly gave him a hint of the situation, as they saw it, and wound up by asking where they could soonest procure a pair of good speed bronchos.

"Horseflesh for sale is rather scarce around this camp," was his answer; "but I guess I can help you out. Poker Pete dropped into town last night, with a little string of ponies he won at draw, over the mountain somewhere. I don't know if he wants to sell, but I guess I could make him hear reason, especially if I talked a little loud. Let's go hunt him up."

Clean Grit remembered having caught a glimpse of the man the previous evening. Though a stranger to him, Pete seemed to be fairly well acquainted with the people of Pay Dirt, which he had previously visited more than once. He was not a bad looking fellow, though he talked loud, and, at the time the boy hustler saw him, appeared to be anxiously hunting for some of the card-chiefs of the town.

He was just sitting down to a game at the Early Bird Saloon when the marshal found him.

A few words explained the errand, at which Peter pursed up his lips after the manner of a man who was puzzled exactly what answer to make.

"Honest truth, Dixy, I don't keer ter sell. I kin make a leetle fortun' outen 'em over at ther Flat ef I kin git 'em thar 'thout givin' ther game away. But I'd like ter 'commo-date yer, an' ther kids ez hez bin standin' by Pay Dirt."

"Well, what are you going to do about it? Say it quick for we have no time to fool."

"It's jest this hyer way: Like ez not ther kids wants ter go to ther Flat, an' when they got thar they could git ther pick ov ther flock thar. I'll give 'em five dollars apiece ter ride ther two spare ones over, er I'll sell 'em to 'em now, an' ef they'll bring 'em in in a week I'll pay the'r money back, an' give 'em ten dollars fur ther barg'in."

"That's offering to put a heap sight of trust in us," remarked Clean Grit, who had been watching the face of the man with a well concealed curiosity.

"Don't fret yerself, kid. It's Ralph Dixon a-standin' behind yer thet makes yer face good. What he says goes, an' ef he don't know what he's talkin' about so much ther wuss fur his pocket. I'm a-trustin' him."

"Guess the best plan, then, will be to do no trusting at all. We'll pay for the bronchos now, and dicker over the trade when we get to the Flat. We won't need them after that, but if you don't want them some one else will."

"Jest ez you choose. An' ef you'll want me fur a pard on ther way, an' 'll wait till I've cleaned out Handy John an' the Dutchman, hyer, I wouldn't mind goin' along."

He spoke in a friendly, careless tone. If he had not had a clearly-defined object in view the boy hustler would have waited.

But he shook his head as he answered:

"Can't wait for General Jackson himself; so do your work up in shape, and hustle right along, and you may catch up wit' us by camping time. We go slow and steady, but that takes us far in a day."

"Go round to the corral and take your choice, then, and let Ralph pay according. I can't lose the chance at these highflyers

here, and they are just itching to begin the game."

It was a careless way of making a trade, but it was just after the style of Poker Pete, as Dixon knew him. He asked for a description of the bronchos, and their prices, and Pete barely took time to give them.

Then, he was throwing around for deal with his two antagonists, while the marshal, followed by the boys, was seeking the broncho corral.

As the corral was located near the center of the town, and just a little to the rear of the line of the buildings, any one taking a horse from it would have to pass quite a distance up or down the valley before he was secure from observation. It happened, too, that the only animals in it at present were the bronchos belonging to Poker Pete.

As the three came near to the gate they saw a man spring to the back of a horse which had just been led out.

"A horse-thief, by glory!" exclaimed Clean Grit, swinging up his hand. "Steady all! He's my meat!"

But, quick as was the boy, the man was as quick. Ralph Dixon had the reputation of being a dead shot, and something was suspected about the boys by his side. Probably the horse-thief recognized them at the moment he was discovered.

As the revolver of Clean Grit cracked, the corral thief swung himself over and downward, the ball whistling close to his head as he went. He touched the ground lightly, and without a pause broke away in flight, darting straight up the decline.

He found cover marvelously soon, and the three did not attempt pursuit. They were more concerned about catching the broncho, which, fortunately, had not been frightened, and which they succeeding in heading back into the pen without much trouble.

"Guess the fellow had as good an eye for horseflesh as I have, and his choice will go for one. If the fool had only known it I wasn't shooting to kill. He might have chucked himself right into line with the lead if he had not been playing in great luck. Next time I'll shoot a trifle higher, and not run so much risk."

"Next time you'll hold plumb center, Grit, ef I know anything. It's what he tried to do not so very long ago, for that's the same cully that tried the snap shot at you when you were waltzing off the store box. If you don't get down to business purty soon he will, and I'll be out a pard, to say nothin' ov what may happen to me."

This information from Move-along Mike, as he was nicknamed, came a trifle late to be of any use. The fellow was already out of sight, and to follow would be useless. Clean Grit shrugged his shoulders, and began to look over the other bronchos.

There seemed to be little choice between them, and a selection was soon made. Saddles and bridles—with which Pete seemed to be well furnished—had been included in the bargain, and in a few minutes the wide-awake lads had paid to Dixon the sum agreed on, and started out of town, well equipped for the dangerous trail they believed they were to follow.

CHAPTER III.

DOWN BRAKES, AND UP HANDS!

THE two boys had not been taken into the confidence of Sailor Sam, but Mike had made a shrewd guess, and hit off the truth as well as though he had received a tip from headquarters.

After the vigorous efforts the road rogues had made to get at the treasure while it was still in the storehouse, it surprised no one that extra precaution was taken, in the shape of a larger guard than usual; but there was a scheme to protect the gold in its transit out, of which nothing was known outside of the circle of those immediately responsible for its safety on the way.

While daylight lasted, there was scant danger of an attack on the coach, since no ground near to the camp was entirely favorable to an ambush. For some hours the little procession pushed on at a fair rate of speed, apparently only anxious to get along as fast as possible.

Inside of the coach there were but the three passengers.

As a good share of the treasure belonged to Ezra Ford, the mine-owner, and as the men of Pay Dirt were all more or less admirers of Ezra's fair daughter, their presence was not to be wondered at, or that they had influence enough to secure a place for young Harker Hazen, the girl's accepted lover; but any one else, not of the guard, would have found a difficulty in securing a passage.

As the stage rolled away from the camp, where he had been both persecuted and prosperous, Ezra Ford seemed to be wrapped in his own thoughts, and paid but little attention to the young couple, who were pretty well wrapped up in themselves, as lovers usually are.

He only came out of his reverie when the coach came to a sudden halt.

Then he awoke to the things that were transpiring around him, and looked out of the window with some anxiety. At the same time, he felt for his gun, for his first thought was that the agents had made their appearance.

To his surprise, he saw another vehicle, smaller than the one in which he was seated, but provided with a team that looked every whit as stout. Perched on the driver's seat was a man whom he recognized as one of the reliables of Pay Dirt, and it was evident at a glance that the outfit had been waiting there for some time.

What it meant he could not at first guess, but he was soon to find out.

Sailor Sam was already on the ground, saying something to the driver of the other concern, and after he had received his answer, he turned to Ford, with a positive nod.

"Sorry, Ezzy, but there's going to be a change in the schedule. It wouldn't 'a' done to be spouting it out back there, but we're going to make an extra quick trip, and the other craft is the one that is to cut and run for it. It's a trim craft, but not as big as a line-of-battle ship. If it is time you are after, you want to get on board, but there's only room for two. Perhaps Harker can make port just as soon as the regular, but I won't swear to it. What do you say about it?"

Ford scarcely knew what to say, and hesitated to answer.

"Think it out in the next minute, then, for we don't lay by any longer than to change cargoes. After that we'll be running on different tacks, with all set that will draw."

"Which concern does the guard go with?" asked Harker, his head appearing alongside of Ford's.

"Mostly with this one," answered Sam, pointing to the second coach.

"We got to make a split, and this craft may catch the hardest raps, so I ought to have the biggest crew."

Young Hazen came to an instant conclusion, if Ezra did not.

"Then Mr. Ford and Helen had better go with you; my place is with the coach which has the weaker guard. There will not be much time lost, for both are going to the one place."

"Tumble out, then, those that are going, for there's no time to lose."

Sam spoke sharply, and it was plain the men of the guard had had their orders beforehand. Some of them sat still, and some—two or three—dismounted, assisting Miss Helen to the ground, and seeing the Fords take their places on the back seat before entering the other coach themselves.

As there were but two seats inside, the quarters were rather contracted, and in addition there was a small but strongly-built box, which rested at their feet in the middle of the floor. As long as they remained awake and in the vehicle, it would be hard for them to take their eyes off of it.

In the other coach this box had occupied a position in the boot; but that was while they were passing over a section of the road believed to be absolutely safe. Now was the time when greater care was to be taken.

It took but a moment or two to make these changes. Then, at a short order from Sailor Sam, two whips cracked, and the two vehicles separated, rolling off in different directions.

Helen said nothing for a time. She understood that for some reason the treasure was supposed to be in danger, and that this movement was intended to save it. It seemed likely the danger would be for the other coach, since this would travel by an unsuspected route. Of course, it was natural Sailor Sam should wish to have her come with this, and she could see for herself there was no room for more; but she would have felt easier if Harker Hazen had been with them.

However, she fancied that coach number one would make such rapid time, now the load had been diminished, that it would escape stoppage; and she did not think there was much danger of it, anyhow.

She would have liked to have questioned Hank Henry, who was in charge of this section of the guard; but he kept himself aloof, and she fell to wondering whether there had been any particular information as to a probable attack on the convoy to cause this unexpected caution.

With so many of the guard, and two of the passengers out, there was plenty of room left in coach number one for Hazen to turn around in.

So much room, in fact, that he soon felt lonesome, and without saying anything to the driver, swung himself out of the window, up to the top, where he found Sailor Sam seated, quietly smoking a pipe.

"My watch on deck, shipmate," he said, as Harker made his appearance. "Don't object to a comrade, though. Guess there's no danger for a while yet, and you must feel lonesome down below."

"Not so lonesome as worried," answered Hazen, as he filled his own pipe. "I am not sure but what I ought to have stuck to the Fords, if I had to go it on foot, or hang on behind. If there is any danger from agents they have you marked down fine. It was a cute dodge to transfer the box; but I am afraid it won't win. They are as sharp on the scent as wolves, and if there has not been a spy dogging our steps I am greatly mistaken—always supposing there is anything to dread from the outlaws."

"Avast, there! Perhaps there are road-pirates, and perhaps there ain't. What we want to do is to be ready for them. Hank will crowd on all sail, and if spy there be, by the time he has run into the lagoon where their craft is lurking, and starts them on the trail, it will be too late to head Hank off. And he'll have the heels of them when it comes to a stern chase."

"And if they follow us, our decks are cleared for action, and I suppose we'll give them the best we got in the ship?" suggested Harker.

"Maybe, and maybe not. I reckon they won't be doing damage for the sake of it, and perhaps it would be as well to let 'em know there's no booty nor beauty here. Then, if they go about on the other tack, there's no harm done."

"I wish I could feel as sure of it. But, if Kill and his demons come to life, or if we meet more like them, they might be ugly customers when they found they had been fooled."

"That's so, and if it looks like a fighting chance when they hail us to lie to, maybe we better give them a broadside, and then run the gantlet. We'll see now it looks."

Up to the time of the transfer Harker Hazen had never doubted the death of the outlaw chief in a tunnel to the storehouse, when he had made the daring attempt to plunder the place. An explosion of dynamite fired by Clean Grit, had caved it in from end to end; and Kill and his men were supposed to have been, at that very moment, in the tunnel, as the direct passage to the treasure room.

Yet, none had actually seen them enter the tunnel, and there was a possibility that by some means little short of a miracle the outlaw desperadoes had escaped the death they so richly merited.

It was a rather startling contingency, then, to contemplate, this thing of falling again into Kill's hands; and Hazen, having already had an experience of that kind, mentally resolved that whatever Sailor Sam might do, he himself would resist to the last.

He showed nothing of his uneasiness, however, and chatted with Sam for some time. The first spot where danger was to be anticipated was still some miles away, and till it was reached he could afford to take things coolly.

With a team going at a good, round trot, miles are dropped behind quite rapidly, and Sam gave no hint. It was something more than a surprise when, an hour before he had the least expectation of hearing it, there suddenly came the disagreeable challenge:

"Down brakes and up with your hands! Another turn of the wheel, driver, and you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER IV.

A GENERAL SCOOP.

At the order young Hazen gave a swift glance to the front and saw three masked men standing in the roadway, with leveled pistols.

That was all he had time to take in. He knew his elevated position made him a fair mark, and that it was almost a certainty he would be slaughtered before he could draw a weapon if he attempted to reach for one, while any delay would only make the chances for successful resistance more slender.

Fortunately, as it seemed to him, he was slightly screened from view, since he was seated at the rear of the top of the coach, and on the near side of the trail, while the outlaws stood upon the off side.

Without waiting to pick a soft spot he dropped over the rear edge of the vehicle, sliding along the boot, and reaching the ground in a heap.

The spot chosen by the agents for the attack was one well suited to their purpose, and they had taken precautions which seemed to render success a certainty.

The trail here was narrow, and hung on the side of a hill almost precipitous in its slope, and with jutting rocks which, scattered along its side, formed the best sort of opportunities for an ambush.

And one or two of these rocks had been rolled down upon the trail, so that it would be impossible to pass in case the driver proved obstinate, and attempted to rush by, while there was scarcely room enough on the trail for the coach to turn around. When it reached the obstructions—which were concealed from sight at a distance by the turn of the hill—there the coach had to stop till the obstructions were rolled away, and to do that last was no easy task.

All this Harker Hazen took in before he dropped, and he suspected that if he wanted to provide for his safety it could better be done by flight than by fight, though he did not intend to get beyond hearing until he

knew for a certainty what Sailor Sam and his guard intended to do.

Only three men were in sight, but it was probable there were half a dozen more within supporting distance; and as those three men had the drop, Hazen did not think Sailor Sam, after what he had lately said, would be apt to offer much resistance.

With this in his mind Hazen went sliding down the hillside below the trail, expecting every minute to be followed by a shot. When he had reached a rock which was large enough to offer protection he halted, and with drawn revolvers listened to hear what was going on above.

It seemed to him his retreat had not been noticed. He had lost a few words, and Sailor Sam was talking, while there was no such haste on either side as there would probably have been had his absence been noted.

"Hands are up, captain, and while all things are balmy perhaps it wouldn't be a bad scheme to prepare for a big disappointment. If you are looking for big money this isn't the place to get it. You can run over the purser's list and if there's anything on the waybill you want you're welcome; but you'll find it a water-haul or I'm a Dutchman."

"Don't you trouble yourself about us. We'll get what we want. But, if any one tries funny business it will be so much the worse for the whole crew. Throw down your weapons there, and then step down yourselves. We want you all in a row."

"Flag of truce a minute, captain. Talk straight, and p'rhaps we can come to terms; but we want to know what the outlook is afore we drop our guns."

"You'll find out without much flagging if you don't get a move on. Cast your eyes up yonder and you will see some Winchester that have a mighty handy look, and they'll be spitting death and destruction if there is any more monkeying. Down with your arms, and we'll let you go, sure, when we're done with you."

A glance in the direction indicated told it was only too true that the coach was commanded from above, and that resistance was a folly under the circumstances.

"All right. We'll take your word for it, and down they go."

Handling his belt gingerly, Sam dropped it into the trail, and the rest followed suit.

Then, one by one, the guard dropped to the ground, and stood ranged alongside, their hands well elevated above their heads.

"Good enough as far as it goes; but we want the rest. Where's the party inside? If he don't show up in a minute by the watch we'll just riddle the hearse."

Sailor Sam looked back over his shoulder toward the coach, anxiety on his face.

He had been so interested with the outlaws in front he had not seen Harker Hazen take his departure, and was afraid the young man was going to attempt resistance just when the men from Pay Dirt had got themselves in a shape whence it would be impossible to take a hand in.

But Hazen did not show up.

By this time he was satisfied he was screened from observation, and it was not likely he would be seen until there was something like a regular search for him. His position was a bad one for offensive or defensive operations, though had he chosen to retreat the way was open. He determined to try to improve it.

Cautiously but in haste he crept along the hillside, crouching low, and inwardly praying no displaced rock or stone might reveal his presence there. He had decided to gain the road again beyond the obstructions, and then, if hostilities opened, he would be on hand.

The road-agents did not carry out their threat of firing upon the coach. With a sud-

den growl the leader of them sprung forward, poising his revolver so as to be ready to take a snap shot at any one who appeared within the coach. With a dexterous twitch, which showed he understood well the workings of the latch, he threw the door open and glared within at the empty space.

There was no possible place where a man might be hidden, and the outlaw turned savagely on Sailor Sam.

"Say, you! Where is the tenderfoot? No nonsense, now. He didn't go with the other hearse, and he ought to be with this one. Talk mighty straight or, down you go."

Sam was more taken aback than the outlaw.

"Shiver my timbers if I know what to say. He was there, and he's not there now. When the squall struck him he must have gone down with everything standing. If he didn't, you can't prove it by me."

"If we don't find him you'll be apt to go down after that fashion yourself. Whereabouts along the road did he drop out?"

"Can't say. Dash my deadlights if I knew he was gone at all. What's the dif' in the reckoning? Go on with your work, he won't try to hinder."

"Dry up on that. It's the tenderfoot we are after. He's our meat."

"Ahoy, up there!"

There were some hasty questions and orders.

The men above had fortunately been a trifle late in taking their positions, for the coach had made a shade better time than was expected. Nothing had been seen by them of Harker Hazen.

When it was too late they looked down the precipice, and two men went back along the trail some distance to search for traces. No one thought of going the other way.

Sailor Sam saw the outlaws were posted. If these men had waylaid them for the purpose of capturing the tenderfoot there was no doubt they had arranged to have a like attention paid to the other stage. He began to fear for the safety of Ezra Ford and his daughter. There was a stronger guard with them, to be sure; but that only made the danger greater for the two. If a fight began who could say who was fated to stop a bullet?

Here, anyhow, the agents were having their own way; and a very disgusted way it was.

A thorough search of the trail and the ground below it showed nothing of Hazen. Inside of the coach there was nothing to reward the outlaws for their labor.

But they did not hesitate to lighten the pockets of Sam and his men, nor to take from the rear boot the one trunk which it contained.

Then, to the surprise of the men from Pay Dirt, who had expected to be allowed to go on their journey without further molestation, the horses were taken from the vehicle, which was then backed to the edge of the trail, and sent thundering down the precipice.

Below, there was a crash as the conveyance struck a boulder as large as itself. They could see it lying there hopelessly shattered.

"Now, then, Mister Man, you and the other men of this outfit, right face, forward march! Hands well up! We mean sport and you'll get enough of it."

"But you said we were to be turned loose," said one of the men, not forgetting to obey the order.

"When we're done with you, yes. But we're not done with you, yet, by a blame sight."

It was too late to think of resistance: at least, until the conditions were more favorable than at present. Off went the procession, the prisoners in advance but so closely followed by the guard there was no danger they would attempt to dart aside. And

with the outlaws was the team, also. All seemed to be fish that came into the net.

For half a mile, perhaps, the march along the trail was kept up in this order. Then, there was a halt, and a moment of anxious listening. From the rear came the noise of distant firearms.

"Got him!" exclaimed the man who was in command.

"I knew it would catch him; but I wish they could bring in the blame galoot alive."

CHAPTER V.

A ROUGH DEAL.

It was easy enough to guess what had happened.

An ambushade had been left behind while Hark Hazen had lain hidden for some time, in a spot where his presence never would have been suspected.

The retiring outlaws and his own friends had passed within a dozen yards of him, but he was lying concealed, and unsuspected, behind a rock. Had he been content to remain there a trifle longer he might have escaped observation altogether, but after waiting until it seemed to him there could be no danger he crept out, and back, to see more thoroughly what fate had overtaken the stage.

He saw the ruins below the trail, but had no chance to investigate.

From above came a hail, and he knew that he was discovered.

Around he turned like a flash, a revolver in his hand, and without waiting to take aim fired at the spot the sound had come from.

There was a cry of pain, followed by a shot in return, and Hazen staggered backward, his pistol dropping from his hand. Before he could guess how badly he had been hurt several men came charging down upon him.

There was a brief flurry, in which the young man gave a good account of himself, and by a straight left-handed stroke sent one of the outlaws backward with a force which nearly knocked the breath out of him.

His strength was still unimpaired, and there was a chance for escape at that instant, but he lost it stooping to regain the revolver which had been shot from his fingers.

Before he could regain an upright position he was down, and two men on his back, fighting to bind his hands together.

He did his best, but the struggle was of no use, for he was too entirely at a disadvantage. His hands once corded together he was helpless.

"No use, cully," growled one of the captors.

"May ez well give it up. 'Twon't make not a differbittern's, in the long run, an' save yer a heap ov proddin' up ez we go erlong. Ther Cap wants yer bad, an' w'ot he says hez ter go. But ef yer hez killed Brick I dunno ez Jolly 'll be apt ter wait tell yer gits that fur. Them two war pards, they war."

The fellow stood with his revolver convenient to Hazen's ear, and from the scowl on his face it looked as though he would not object very strongly to pulling the trigger if some one in authority gave the order.

His partner had hurried up the hillside and by this time had halted by a motionless heap, scarcely to be discerned from below since it lay in a little gully which had been washed out by the late rains.

He bent over and looked down into the face that was upturned in the evening air. Then he felt over the heart of the fellow, who had caught a bullet by the merest chance.

"No use, Tony, Brick are done fur! Got it solid in ther neck, an's stiff ez a poker a'ready. Shell we plant him, now, er leave

him hyer tell we kin tell Jolly? P'rhaps he'd want ter be et ther fun'ral."

"Lay him out straight an' come ahead. We got ter do some tall steppin' ef we wants ter ketch up. Et's a blamed pity yer didn't hold straighter while you war about it, so we wouldn't 'a' bin troubled with this back-load ov gerloot."

The outlaws did not linger long, nor did they indulge in much further conversation. The prisoner made up his mind he was not badly damaged, and that, for the present, submission would be his best game. He allowed himself to be hustled along at a pace which bid fair soon to overtake the advance.

If his hands had not been bound together Harker would have made an attempt at escape. Several times he thought he saw his opportunity; but did not care to be adrift here in the wilderness with his arms powerless, and behind his back. It might well be the death of him. He rather preferred not to believe the man who had been called Tony, who attempted to give him something of either warning or advice.

"Jolly's a queer sorter a cuss," he said, as they went along. "Thar's no tellin' jest how he'll take it, but, I reckon, middlin' hard. Brick war his pard, an' onless ther capt'n makes him draw in his horns I 'spect he'll want yer sculp, an' go fur it, 'cordin'. Ez he's bossin' this part ov ther outfit we ain't got much ter say 'bout it; but ef it'll do yer ary good you kin jest bet double thet ef Jolly takes yer ouden ther wet ther cap'n'll be apt ter make him foller. Hist, now, an' speak him fair! Hyer we are, comin' up to him, and he'll be axin' questions mighty soon."

It was a fact they had about overtaken the party which had first moved away. When they reached it they found a pair of the stage horses had been harnessed to a light wagon, which had been concealed near the trail.

The horses which had brought this wagon there had been used for other purposes, and Sam now understood why the teams had been taken from the coach.

It took but a few words to explain to the lieutenant of the outlaws, who went by the name of Jolly, what had happened.

The scrimmage had been short and sharp, Brick was dead, and here was the prisoner to speak for himself.

Jolly turned toward the prisoner with deadly smoothness in his tone.

"I think I have a sure thing of it on you when the captain takes you in hand, for he don't love you a bit. If he fails I'll see to it myself, and never fear but what I'll do justice. Tie his legs together, you, and toss him into the wagon along with the trunk. It may bang him up a bit, but I guess, Tony, you can bring him in alive."

"I kin try," answered Tony. "Ett's ez like ter bu'st me own neck ez his ef thar's a upset in ther dark, but you bet I'll drive keerful."

"You better would. Now then, you lads, we have about all we expected, and it's time to be making tracks. We have more than a handful here to be looking after so there's no use for foolishness. The first man who gives trouble, drop him in his tracks. Forward!"

The outlaws closed up around their prisoners, and the whole party moved off without further parley, though Tony and the wagon did not follow the same trail far.

Jolly and his men did not intend to be bothered with their prisoners very long. At least, they had no use for the greater part of them.

Before long they came to a gulch which led away to the right, and here the direction of the march was changed, and soon another halt was called.

"Truss them up," said the leader, carelessly.

The order was a surprise to the men from Pay Dirt, and Sailor Sam was the only one who thought of resistance. As the road-agent who was to attend to him made a sudden grab at his collar Sam kicked out as savagely as he knew how, doubling the man up in a heap.

Then, he darted away, willing to run his chances of catching a bullet rather than submit to being bound and left there.

The bullet reached him, too. Without hesitation the outlaw-lieutenant fired at the fleeing man, who flung up his arms and fell headlong.

Without any apparent life Sam lay there. It seemed scarcely worth while to examine him, but Jolly did take the trouble.

It looked as though there could be no mistake about the fatal nature of the wound. The ball seemed to have struck somewhere near the temple, and there was blood enough to show it was no mere graze.

"Just as well," said Jolly, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"It will save trouble."

And without further attention to the storekeeper he led his men away.

Harker Hazen in the distance heard that shot, and suspected why it was fired. Bound though he was he struggled to a sitting posture, and listened eagerly. Tony's hand on his shoulder forcing him back made him uncertain whether there was more than the one report, but he guessed the truth pretty closely.

"Sorry fur ye, cully, but ett's no use. I kin fetch in a body jest ez easy ez I kin a breathin' critter. You want ter lay thar whar ye'r put er you'll be put whar you'll lay. Sabbe?"

Tony spoke savagely, and Harker Hazen had no doubt he meant what he said. While it was evident they did not care to kill him at once, it was plain no one seemed to care much in what shape he was delivered at headquarters.

He stretched himself down again, taking it as comfortably as he could between a trunk and keg which occupied more space than he would have cared to give them.

The keg, especially, was like the boy who wanted to have his half of the bed in the middle. It bounced about a great deal, and he had hopes that it would finally bounce out of the wagon, though no such good thing as that came to pass.

After that the journey went on in silence. Tony had enough to do to follow the course marked out for him, while Hazen was busy with his own thoughts, which were not very cheerful ones. Once or twice Tony seemed to have lost his way, for he turned back, and after a little struck out in a new direction.

It was a long ride and a wearisome one, but at length a streak of light appeared in front of them, and there was a sharp, low hail, which brought a quick halt, and answer to the challenge, from Tony.

"Time you war comin'," growled the sentinel. "Jolly's hyer, an' wants ter see yo' afore he goes back ter berry his pard."

CHAPTER VI.

CLEAN GRIT AND HIS PARDS TO THE RESCUE.

"We haven't exactly made a fortune, but we have come out of Pay Dirt a little bit ahead," said Clean Grit, evidently in high good humor as they swung into the trail taken by the coach.

"This beats foot-back all to pieces."

"Oh, it's all slap-up for you," grunted Mike, who, at the pace they were going, found himself bouncing up and down in a way that might be healthy, but which he did not think was at all nice.

"You've been here before; but it's no skit for me, now don't you forget it. Keep this up long enough and my mother's darling will just be a jelly, that he will."

"That's right. You have a heap of things

to learn in this world, and you are learning one of them now. When I get through with you I'll have you an all around pard, that I can trust for big money, and get there with, every time. Don't think about it, Mike, and the thing will come natural to you before you know it."

"It's all right when I'm goin' up. It's when I begin ter come down that I'm a thinkin' ther hardest. When I stop there ain't much breath left, to think with or anything else."

Clean Grit laughed, though not after a fashion that would badly wound the feelings of his pard. He was at home so thoroughly in the saddle it seemed queer his friend should make such a poor showing there.

Still, he had something else to think about, and had confidence in the pluck of his companion. There was no use to worry because Mike did not prove to be a finished equestrian at the start.

"I'm sorry for you, pard, but you just got to hold on and do your level best. I want you with me, and I'm not going to let you fall out of the procession. Time enough to-morrow to think about whether you can stand it or not. They have a good long start, and they won't be going at a walk, either. If we want to come into the ring before the show is out we must keep moving."

Mike grunted a trifle worse than at the start, but shut his mouth and said nothing. He was too busy trying to keep his balance to care whether they overtook the coach or not.

Fortunately, he had an easy-going pony, and after a while became accustomed somewhat to its stride, so that he was no longer in fear of sprawling by the wayside.

Seeing this, Clean Grit pressed the pace a little harder, and they began to get over the ground at a rate which promised to bring them up with the convoy before many hours.

Suddenly, the boy hustler reined in his steed.

"Hold hard, Mike! There's something hyer worth the looking at."

They had reached the spot where the transfer had been made, and the keen eyes of Clean Grit had taken in the outline of the case at a glance.

"Hold on to my bridle a moment while I take a look around. There's sign hyer of some kind, though I think it's too soon for Captain Kill and his men to be in it."

There had been considerable moving to and fro just there, but Clean Grit read the story as though it was a printed book.

At least he thought he did.

"Samuel ain't asleep very sound, now you just take your affidavit to that. Hyer's a wrinkle that Pay Dirt would crack its heels together and shout over if it knew of it."

"There's been a split, yes. What is ther to shout about?"

"Can't you see? Stay there a minute longer, if you please. I want to get it all down fine. Agents laying out for them on this trail. Not likely to have a scout quite so near to Pay Dirt. Turned the box over to another hearse, and—did the Fords go along with it? Yes. Hyer's a dainty little track in the dust; and that looks like the marks of the old man's hoof. Oh, there were no flies on that outfit. They'll come into the Flat by the back trail; and if Kill is on deck with his men he can take a mortgage on the empty concern and let her go through. Much good will she do him. They can see her coming from the rocks around the bend and flash a signal over to the gang that will be waiting about five miles further on; and won't they do some systematic swearing when they know it's too late to put salt on the tails of their golden eagles?"

The boy hustler by this time had learned the lay of the land for miles out of Pay Dirt, and was reeling off the way things were to go as well as though he had seen it in a book.

Mike was not so enthusiastic.

"Strikes me, if it is all so serene I'll crawl off this galloping crab and take it slow and easy back to camp. We won't be wanted for business, and I'll go to bed with a shovel if I want any more of this for fun."

"All very well, Michael, if it was not for the fact that accidents will happen in the best regulated families, and we're around on just that chance. Perhaps they'll lose a wheel yet, before they get through. I'm going ahead; and as for Move-along—he's going, too."

When Clean Grit talked that way, disputing was not in order, and with a shrug of his shoulders and a grunt of disgust Mike gathered his steed together and sent it off alongside that of the hustler, who had remounted in haste.

"The trail's not just such a plain one," said Clean Grit, as he retook the gallop.

"We want to catch up before it gets too dark. If we don't, there may be a change of the programme that will leave us out in the cold. I don't yearn to get lost in the mountains."

They had not gone very far before Mike could see his companion had made no mistake.

Although the trail was comparatively smooth, it was one not often followed, and the country through which it passed was growing wilder every moment.

From the hoof-tracks Clean Grit knew the party ahead was going at a rapid rate, but as the ground was rising, the advantage was in his favor, and he did not despair of overtaking them within the next hour.

"Pears ter me I hear a sound," suggested Mike, after he had pounded on in silence for half an hour.

"Are you gettin' up on them, or are they ketchin' up ter us? Seems ter be about nip an' tuck."

"Right you are, for a quarter. It's some one coming from behind. Keep your eye peeled, but please let me do the shooting. I don't believe in your shooting from horseback worth a cent, and I'll be too near to be comfortable."

The hoofstrokes sounded nearer, and there could be no mistake about the direction whence the sound came. Some one was following them, and at a faster pace than they had been able or willing to take.

"P'rhaps it's Kill, himself. I'd as soon get a measure on him first. Nothing like holding the drop on that stripe."

Mike looked a little anxiously toward that side of the trail, as though he would like to lay an ambush for the coming man. If it was one of the agents it was more than likely he would shoot without warning, and shoot to kill. Kill and his gang had less than love for the boys.

"Get a brace on, Michael. More likely it is one of the guard that has been left behind. Draw in a little, and we'll let him hail us if he wants to."

Nevertheless, in spite of his words, Clean Grit managed to glance over his shoulder from time to time, to make sure the man was approaching with peaceable intentions. When they slackened their speed he gained rapidly.

"Thought it war you!" exclaimed a careless-sounding voice, which somehow seemed familiar.

"Got through Handy John an' the Dutchman in great shape. Didn't have a brace of slugs between them. Then, I reckoned I'd sooner have company over to the Flat, an' lit out accordin'. Come nigh ter missin' ybu at the forks, though. Can't you whoop it up a leetle faster? I'll run ther risk ter ther hoss-flesh."

The new-comer was Poker Pete, the man from whom they had bought the bronchos. He talked as though he had been drinking, though he was far from being drunk, and Clean Grit did not anticipate any danger

from him, though he was somewhat surprised to see him. Unless there was urgent business at the Flat it looked a little odd to be starting out so late in the day, even for the satisfaction of having such company as they were.

The boy did not air his thoughts, though, but making some brief answer, allowed Pete to carry the heavy end of the conversation.

The gambler asked some few questions, but did not insist upon answers, so they gave him no insight into their plans, and 't was not long before Clean Grit began to listen now and then for the rattle of wheels.

Once he thought he heard them, but the sound faded away, and Pete gave no sign he had noticed it.

The first positive sign the coach was near was one loud enough and plain enough for those who were running to read.

Without the least notice, and at no great distance ahead, there was fired a scattering volley of pistol-shots, which was followed by a cry as of a man in agony.

CHAPTER VII.

A DARING RUSE.

THE hearse bowed merrily along for some time after the transfer had been made, and after a while Helen became satisfied with the state of affairs.

She had no great fear of the agents, yet she thought it well enough to take all proper precautions for the safety of the treasure. How the scheme was going to operate she could not exactly tell, but had no doubt it was all right. As there was certainly no room for more passengers she submitted to the separation from Harker Hazen with the best grace possible, and had not the slightest doubt of their meeting the following day.

The guards themselves seemed to be of the same opinion, for they rode along careless enough to all appearance, though there were no sounds to be heard but the fall of the horses' feet on the ground, and the low rattle and grind of the wheels.

Twilight began to come on, at last, and the trail seemed doubly gloomy. At an exclamation from the driver Helen looked hastily out of the window.

There was a crack of the whip as though a pistol had been fired, and the horses started off at a faster pace than ever, but she was not so taken by surprise that she did not see three or four men whose faces were well covered by strange masks, who stood by the roadside, looking irresolutely at the coach as it dashed by them.

Ezra's face was at her shoulder, and in spite of himself the word, "Agents!" fell from his lips.

If they intended to attack, they were a trifle slow in their movement. They were already being left behind when they ran out into the road, and the foremost man raised his carbine to take aim at the driver of the coach.

So it seemed, at least, both to those who were watching from the vehicle, and three of the mounted guard who had been following at a little distance, and had just come into sight.

There could be no doubt about what these masked men were, and the men of Pay Dirt did not hesitate, but at once opened fire.

Unfortunately, though they delivered a volley at nearly point-blank range, the shots did little execution. One of the outlaws was scratched, and that was all.

It was this volley Clean Grit and his companions heard, and the cry following it appeared to have been from a man who was more frightened than hurt, since he, with the rest of the outlaws, wheeled about on the instant, and barred the way.

For a few moments there was a lively little engagement, and then the men of Pay

Dirt took to cover by the side of the trail. The outlaws had received a reinforcement, and were beginning to shoot uncomfortably close.

Meantime the coach had swung ahead, to get out of the way of chance bullets. It was an unfortunate thing the guard had become divided, but the men with the coach sprung down, their rifles ready, intending to take a hand in the fight. With the outlaws between two fires, the chances ought to be still with them.

Then was when the surprise really occurred.

Rising by the roadside, as though they had popped up through the ground, a still larger force of masked men appeared, and they came so suddenly that each one of the guard was covered by a Winchester before he knew the danger.

"Stiddy, all you!" came the hail, in a low but stern voice.

"We don't want to do any killin', but the first whimper we hear, down goes every buildin'—to stay. Drop yer guns, an' up with yer hands!"

At the same time three more of the outlaws advanced to the coach, and while one of them covered the driver, the other two paid attention to the passengers, who had retained their place inside.

"Sorry, Mister Man—you with ther female in tow—but we'll hev ter ax yer to come out ov yer shell. Don't go ter hump in' yerself, fer ef we sh'd miss you, we'll hit her sure. Not a yelp now, er it'll be ther wuss fur her, ter say nothin' ov you."

Ezra had as much courage as the most, but here he was fairly cornered, and if the rest of the guard was to be stood off, he did not intend to play a lone hand.

For the present he considered the sponge as thrown up, and submitted to what seemed the inevitable. He had something to lose here; but fortunately he had interests elsewhere that were worth living for.

The coach door was already open, and there was not a minute of time lost on the part of the outlaws.

The two passengers were hustled out, and received by a brace of ruffians, while the third swung out the strong box which had been lying on the floor of the coach.

"Tap her, boys. That's what we're hyer fur, an' it's too onhandy ter kerry all that plank an' iron when a sack'll hold the oro. An' we'll know what we're gittin', too."

The order came from the leader, who had moved over in time to see the box passed out.

They were all ready for the work. Without delay the chest was attacked, and did not long resist their efforts.

Then, two or three heads crowded together over the box, and willing hands turned out the contents.

A smothered execration rose to the lips of the outlaw.

No gold was this, but some carefully packed specimens of quartz, such as might be picked up almost anywhere along the roadside.

"It's a bite, curses on ther luck! Ther gold must be hid somewhar about ther hearse. Go through it quick."

One man continued to hold Ford in check, but the rest, headed by the leader, began a hasty search.

To no purpose, though. If there was any treasure about it was no longer in the conveyance; and it was hardly likely it had been divided among the guard, to carry in their pockets. Here was a check with a vengeance.

The leader gave a hasty glance around, and as he looked, a ringing cheer came from the rear, and there was a brisk clatter of hoofs. Clean Grit and his companions were coming up to the rescue.

As they swept along the trail the guards came out from the shadows, hailing them as

they came, and the united force, pistols in hand came charging down upon the advance guard of the outlaws.

The chief heard, and did not hesitate. He had laid his plans so as to crush without a fight, and apparently, since there was no treasure to battle over, he had no stomach for a fray. He uttered a long-drawn cry which resembled the hoot of an owl, and darted toward Helen.

At the signal several men with a number of led horses made their appearance. There was mounting in hot haste, the advance guard fired a volley or two and then melted away into the darkness, and when Clean Grit dashed up to the coach he found Ezra Ford standing bareheaded looking around him in a dazed way for his daughter, who had disappeared along with the outlaws.

With Clean Grit and his pard came Poker Pete; and in the charge his revolver had cracked as loud as any. Now, he broke in before the boys could say a word.

"Tell it quick, an' tell it straight. What's ther wu'st."

Ezra hardly knew as yet, but in a few words he told that the outlaws had opened the treasure-box, and then, at hearing the noise made by the new arrivals, had apparently dropped it in fright, and made off, he feared, with his daughter as a prisoner.

Pete swung out of the saddle with the speed of an expert, and bent over the box.

He expected to find it rifled; but a glance revealed the facts.

"A sell on the Red Owls!" he laughed.

"Bully for our side! Now, you ez are men foller me, an' we'll hev ther gal back afore she knows she's gone."

He leaped into the saddle, and with the boy pards following struck off in the wake of the fleeing outlaws.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT CLEAN GRIT FOUND.

THE outlaws had a start they were not slow to improve on, and before the pursuit had lasted long Clean Grit realized they had a task before them which was well-nigh hopeless.

The night was coming on fast, and already there was no such thing as following a trail from on horseback. The country, too, was totally unfamiliar to him, so that he had no idea where the outlaws might have a lurking place, or which direction to take to stand a chance of heading them off.

Luck nevertheless, was in their favor. From time to time there were spots of stony ground, and some of the horses of the outlaws were shod. An occasional hoofstroke came to their ears, that served to keep them on the right track, and Poker Pete still kept in the lead he had assumed at starting.

Behind, came several of the men from Pay Dirt—the rest of the guard staying with the coach and Ezra Ford.

At a favorable spot the boy hustler ranged up alongside of Poker Pete.

"I guess the Killers are harder to kill than Pay Dirt thought for. The captain seems to be on the trail, large as life and as big as a bear. I'll never believe he is dead again till I see him planted myself; and I'll want to dig up his corpus in about three weeks to make sure of it then."

"Captain Kill nothin'," grunted Pete, leaning down in his saddle as he listened to a faint sound in the advance.

"Didn't yer git a glimps ov ther head-gear? It's ther Red Owls, what's bin a-workin' ther trails over ther Flat. When they give that hoot I war sure ov it, an' I set myself all ther harder ter git a hack at 'em."

"Met them before, did you?"

"You bet I met 'em, an' thar war lots ov solid reasons why I didn't oughter hev met 'em. I hed jest broke Dandy Mack, an' had my pockets a-bulgin' out with the sequins. An' they took 'em all."

"Sorry for your bad luck, pard, but it may have been all the better for us. If it hadn't been for that perhaps you wouldn't have been half as anxious to stay on the trail. You stick by us, and we'll stay with you till we run this trail aground."

"Oh, I'm thar ter stay, an' ef we don't make ther rifle ourselves we'll go over ter Magic City an' git out ther minnit men. When thar's a lady in ther case Poker Pete does his duty er breaks a girth."

"Keep your eyes peeled, though, for I have an idea that when they find a good place, if we keep pressing them, they will make a halt and try to stand us off for good. A night like this, fine shooting don't go for much, and we'll want to keep hustling if we want to save our skins."

"Not weakenin', be ye, kid?"

"Not weakening, but rubbing up my eyes a little to be sure they'll be wide open. If you know a spot where they will be apt to make a stand, give us a hint before we get there, so we'll be good and ready."

"That's right. I'll post ye ef I kin, but one spot's purty near like another, an' I reckon when we git nigh ernuf they'll turn an' snap regardless."

This sort of work was not the thing to suit Move-along Mike.

He had done his share in the scrimmage, and would have been willing enough to have kept up with the crowd on foot, but charging through the darkness on a half-broken broncho, expecting every minute to go heels over head from its back, was not in his line.

Clean Grit tried to keep an eye on him, speaking a word of encouragement now and then, but gradually he fell behind, and there was no waiting just then. Finally, the boy hustler found his pard had dropped altogether out of sight and hearing.

He called once or twice cautiously, but there was no answer.

Then, he shrugged his shoulders, and went pounding on.

"Mike is big enough and old enough to look out for himself, and he has the knack of getting lost to always turn up at the right time. Guess he'll be around by morning. If he's not I'll hunt him up when I have more time. His revolver would come in mighty handy if there's a fight, but he's no good on a trail, anyhow."

"Hyer we be!" exclaimed Pete, as several shots flamed out of the darkness.

His revolvers came into his hands as if by magic, and lying low along the neck of his horse he pushed straight on, firing at the flashes as he went.

Without knowing it Clean Grit imitated him almost exactly, though he fired only with his right hand, the left clasping his broncho's neck. He knew there was more than one chance of catching a bullet, and meant to hold on till the last gasp if such a thing happened.

The engagement did not long continue, but it was brisk while it lasted. Poker Pete was utterly reckless of danger, and bore a charmed life to boot. He sent a bullet in the direction of every flash, and all the while was driving his steed toward the spot from whence the firing came.

The boy hustler was every whit as cool, and though they could catch no glimpse of the enemy, they were doing better work than they could be certain of.

Had they dared to leave the bronchos they might have finished up their labors in great shape, but when the Owls broke away just before the spot of their ambushade was reached, they were unable to follow them up the broken ground over which their flight was made, and the sound of their footsteps ceased almost immediately.

"Cuss 'em, they didn't mean fight, but they got in ther' work all ther same," growled Pete, as he held in his horse and peered anxiously around him.

"Looks ez though, onless we're right good on ther guess, we're left mighty bad."

They heard no longer the clink of horses' hoofs ahead, and were not altogether certain of which way they had been heading when the fracas began.

For a moment or two Pete remained silent, while he appeared to be studying over the position.

"Thar's a spot whar it's more ner likely they'll strike fur," he began, at length.

"Ef ye'r game ter run ther reesks, I reckon I kin strike so nigh it ther difference won't 'mount ter much. Ther rest ov our gang don't seem ter be b'ilin' over ter git in front, but Poker Pete are in fer ther war ef he hez ter go it alone."

"Lead on, old man, and Clean Grit will stay by you. When they went for Miss Helen they hit me right where I lived."

The ride which followed was a dismal one, and without much encouragement to the boy hustler, save that Poker Pete never was for a moment at a loss. When Clean Grit questioned him he said he had prospected all over this country, and if he got his bearings right could go through it with his eyes shut.

Some hours elapsed without meeting with any sign of the outlaws, or any evidence they were on the right track. Then, as they slowly picked their way along over a difficult bit of ground they heard not very far away what they took to be a low groan.

The two drew in and made not a sound. So far as they knew, if there was any one near them in pain it was one of the outlaws, and it was scarcely likely he could have come this far without companions.

After a little the groan was repeated, and that sound was followed by a muttering as of some one talking to himself. Outlaw or not, the two could not leave a suffering man there. They advanced, though with caution, for there might be a trap.

No trap was it, however, but they found a man tightly bound, lying upon the ground. When Clean Grit had struck a match and held it up over his face, he saw with surprise the man was Sailor Sam, and that his cheek was covered with blood from a wound on the side of his head.

"Great Scott, pard! how did you come here?" asked the boy, as, first thing of all he applied a knife to the cords which were around his old friend.

"Who—who's that? Shiver my timbers but I thought I heard the hail of an old messmate."

"A messmate it is, Sam, but not such a very old one either. We'll put you right on your feet in a holy minute. What's gone wrong with you?"

"The bloody land pirates, pard. They've scuttled my hull, but I'll go down with colors flying. Sailor Sam is the true blue."

He tried to rise as he spoke, but the effort was vain, and he fell back with a groan louder far than the one by which he had called attention to the spot. Then he began to mutter to himself after a fashion Clean Grit did not like to hear.

"Oh, come now," the boy urged.

"You are all right now, and we'll stand by you. How did you get in this snap?"

"The bloody land pirates. They took our craft—but they made no haul. Ha, ha! We were too sharp for them. Listen. Put your ear down, and I'll tell you."

The mind of the man appeared to be wandering, and the boy hardly knew what to do. He listened, however, as Sam began to mumble something in his ear. What it was the sailor wanted to tell he could not exactly understand, for he was so fearful of being overheard his words were scarcely intelligible. While Clean Grit listened something less than a mountain seemed to fall on his shoulders, and before he could draw weapon, or offer resistance, the lad was a prisoner.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DANGERS OF A CONFIDENCE.

It was no easy task holding the boy, for he was slippery as an eel, and tried his best to wriggle out from under his captor.

"No use, kid, we got yer foul. Better let up on that afore a axcident happens."

The coarse, rough voice was entirely strange, but Clean Grit had no doubt he had fallen into the hands of the road-agents.

In the excitement of meeting with Sailor Sam he had forgotten about his companion. Now he remembered him, and wondered if he had been captured in the same noiseless way.

"Hawks about, Pete!" he cried.

"If you're not in the hole yet take care you don't get there."

"Don't worry about Pete, youngster. If your ears were as sharp as they ought to be you would have heard him take a tumble a bit ago. Lift your feet, my boy, and come along. You are wanted."

The voice belonged to some one else than the first speaker, and Clean Grit understood he was in the power of a gang.

The words gave him hope, though. They might have killed or crippled him on the spot if they were afraid to truss him up and leave him there. He did not suspect he could be of any value to them as a prisoner, and since what Pete had told him in regard to the Red Owls he did not believe there could be any special hatred among these outlaws to account for their treatment.

They did not seem to be the worst of ruffians, after all, and he thought it best to speak a good word for Sam.

"Say, you men, I don't ask anything for myself, but if you're white you'll look after a wounded man that's lying there. If you don't, he'll be dead before morning."

"Blamed ef I don't think he's dead now," said the first speaker, who had been making an examination.

"What shall we do with him, boss."

"Let a couple of the boys put him up behind you and tie him there. Dead or alive you bring him into camp, and if he comes in dead I'll be looking sharp to see if there has been any mistake about it. If there has it will be the worse for you."

The order was obeyed, and soon Clean Grit found himself in like position behind one of the other men. Though he could barely make out the nearest of the moving figures, the men attended to their work as though daylight and darkness were the same to them.

All this time there was no sign of Poker Pete, and the lad began to hope, in spite of what had been told him, that the gambler had succeeded in making his escape. There were at least half a dozen in the party, and they pushed on in a rapid but noiseless manner.

After what seemed to be a long journey came a halt that was evidently for the night. There was a sentinel posted some little distance from the camp, and several men were already there, reclining by the side of a low fire. Perhaps there were more not far away.

"See that the kid don't get away; and as for Sailor Sam—I'll take a look at him and we'll dress him up the best we know how. Perhaps by morning he will be able to talk."

There began to be something strangely familiar about the voice of the leader, and he bent down over Sailor Sam, who had been eased down from the horse, and stretched upon the ground near to the fire, Clean Grit recognized him with a start.

In spite of changes in voice and dress, this was the man known as Captain Kill, and who had posed at Pay Dirt in the dual of Doctor Hanshaw and Drunken Davy.

He was evidently adding another character to his repertoire, but when once on the scent nothing could deceive the keen-eyed lad.

Neither by word nor look did the boy intend to betray the fact of recognition, for by

so doing he could only hasten the evil moment he saw looming up for him in the near future.

There was a reason for the solicitude about the life of Sam. There was a mystery about the treasure which had left Pay Dirt under the storekeeper's charge, and it might be that he alone was able to unravel it. The fingers of the whilom doctor had lost none of their deftness, and as he rapidly examined his patient a frown settled on his face.

"Looks as though it was a bad case," thought the boy hustler.

"Wonder if he thinks he can bring the dead to life. Poor Sam! The fellow that struck him hit harder than Kill meant, and I wouldn't like to stand in his shoes."

Captain Kill, for he it was, recognized that for the present he could do nothing more than minister to the man. To hope for any lucid conversation would be folly. Finally, the storekeeper was left under the charge of a man detailed to act as nurse, and silence rested over the camp.

Clean Grit saw he was too closely bound and guarded to hope for escape, and though he remained awake some time, watching for a chance, tired nature was at last too much for him, and in spite of his discomfort he fell asleep.

When he awoke day had broken, and the outlaw camp was already astir.

The lad had a ravenous appetite, and before long had a chance to show it. There was no design to starve him, for a bountiful if simple meal was set before him, and he did it full justice.

Then Kill made his appearance.

Sailor Sam was but little better, though he breathed and moved feebly!

Kill examined him, and then turned to Clean Grit.

"Sonny, I guess you want to get out of this as bad as we want you out. There's just one way, and that is to open up to bed-rock. Are you willing to talk, or must we put the screws on?"

"Talk! Bless your soul! I'm just dying to talk. Set a man up hyer to listen to me and I'll talk the soul out of him. And first along, if he's a church member he had better hold his fists over his ears. They will be principally cuss words."

The Boy Hustler reeled this off in a free and easy manner, but he felt far from easy. He began to suspect what it was Captain Kill wanted of him, and could guess what might be his fate if the outlaw chief did not get his wish.

"Save all that up till after you have told me what I want to know. I will give you a man then to talk blind if it will do you any good. Now, what I want to hear is the words Sailor Sam told you, just before we took you prisoner. He is in no condition to speak or we would get them at first hand. Time is an object. Speak up, and speak the truth."

"Because I don't carry a hatchet is no sign I don't deal in gospel. I'll tell the truth, and stick to it and swear to it; but blame me if I know what you're driving at."

"That won't do. We know you're not of the forgetting kind, and we know he said to you the very thing we want to hear. Out with it; and remember it's a little more than life you are playing for. If you stay obstinate you will be wishing you were dead before we are through with you."

"Hope I may die, and that's a fact, if I know what you are driving at. He said something about the bloody land pirates, and then keeled over. If you fellows had kept paws off he might have said something more, but as far as this court knows he didn't."

"My boy, you are a liar from 'wayback, and I think we'll convince you of it. Last time of asking: what did he say?"

"And last time of answering: I've told

you all I know about it. Crack your whip."

Clean Grit spoke with determination that would have been just as fixed had he been able to give the answer the outlaw desired to hear; but, as the reader knows, the lad really had not understood the confidence Sam tried to make, though he now guessed what was its nature.

Several burly outlaws had strolled that way, and were standing at ease, waiting for orders.

"Cut the jacket off his shoulders, and carry him over to the fire. We'll see if we can't roast the truth out of him. We should have been off before this, and any more delay will come out of his hide in one shape or another."

The latter part of this was more to himself than to the men, who were already obeying his orders.

Bound at the wrists and ankles, Clean Grit could offer no resistance, even if he had desired to, and when they threw him upon his face one of the men planted a heavy foot upon his body, and kept him there.

"We'll start easy with you. Here's a little one at first."

Picking out a coal little bigger than a spark Captain Kill dropped it upon the bare skin of the boy.

It hurt, of course, but it was only a foretaste of what was to come.

"The next one will be bigger, and they'll keep on getting that way till we pile on the back-log last of all, if you keep your grit that long. Better speak while you have the chance."

The next coal was indeed larger, and made the boy wince in spite of himself. He understood now that though the chief was anxious enough to gain the information he believed the boy hustler possessed, yet he took a fiendish delight in the torture of the lad who had already more than once spoiled his plans.

Had Clean Grit told all the road-agent wished to hear it is doubtful if he would have left off the threatened scarification.

The boy's teeth shut more tightly, and Captain Kill raised another coal.

CHAPTER X.

HARKER HAZEN COURTS PERIL, AND FINDS IT.

CLEAN GRIT could still squirm his head around slightly, and he saw what was coming.

"Say, my friend," he said, as calmly as he could:

"There's sometimes a hereafter, and it's just as well to look a little out. The next time I hold on you it will be a dead center, and the lead goes to kill. I know you now, and don't you believe it that I'll ever forget you."

"Happy to say, my lad, the acquaintance is mutual; and it is for that very reason I'm taking care there shall be no hereafter as long as I find you in this impenitent frame of mind. Take your choice, now, or hold your peace. Speak, or croak."

"I've given you the level truth, and if that's not enough, crack your whip. I can't grin, but I'll try to bear it."

"Curse you, if I can't get the pointer I can make you howl. Here it comes."

The boy hustler could already feel the heat of the living fire. He knew the captain was playing with him now in order to break his nerve if possible; but he realized that Kill would not long delay his vengeance.

"Let her went," he gritted between his set teeth, and the muscles on his back corded up tensely as he nerved himself for the torture.

"Before it has lain there a minute it will have eaten its way in to your life. Good-by, young man, and there it is."

The coal dropped—and so did Captain Kill and his assistant ruffian.

With a great leap a man bounded to the spot and struck out twice, left and right.

The young man was Harker Hazen, who had just succeeded in slipping his bonds. So far, little attention had been paid to him, save to see that he was, as the outlaw supposed, securely fastened.

The neglect, however, did not make him feel any the more secure. He was sure his time would come, and that he had little to hope for if he remained a prisoner until Captain Kill took leisure to attend to him.

He did not waste his strength in frantic efforts, or attract attention to himself by unguarded movements, but very coolly and quietly continued his efforts. The result was, just at the critical moment for Clean Grit he slipped the cords from hands and feet, and was ready for flight.

Had he so chosen Hazen could have stood a good chance to escape, for the outlaws had their attention directed toward the scene at the fire.

Fortunately for the boy hustler the attention of Hazen had been drawn in the same direction, and it was the sight of what was going on there that hastened his movements. He did not stop to consider, but the moment he was loose struck straight in to the rescue, all unweaponed as he was.

Without a word he snatched from the belt of the outlaw a knife, and slipped it through the cords on the boy with careful strokes. He knew escape was the only thing which could save Clean Grit, and for the instant forgot his own danger.

"Up and away!" he shouted as he caught the lad by the shoulder and swung him to his feet.

Still retaining his hold, Harker would have turned to flee, but Clean Grit held him back long enough to snatch at the revolver in the belt of the already rising outlaw.

Flourishing the pistol in his hand the boy hustler broke away, and together the two started in a wild flight down the gorge.

Under the circumstances it could be little else than an excited flurry; and unless luck aided them it would be strange if both made their escape.

Luck was against them, too.

Three men appeared in front, with extended hands.

Clean Grit expected a shot and was not waiting for it to come.

"Out of the way!" he shouted, throwing up his own hand, and as he saw no shrinking in the men who barred his way he pulled trigger.

Only a click followed.

He was about to hurl the apparently useless weapon at the outlaw nearest when second thought caused him to change his mind.

"To the bush, pard, it's our only chance!"

With the hasty exclamation he leaped to one side, and almost immediately vanished.

Harker Hazen would have been willing enough to follow suit, but there was only the one line of retreat which Clean Grit had followed, and already one of the outlaws had sprung forward toward the spot where the boy had disappeared.

"If I have to die it will be while trying to make my teeth meet," gritted Hazen, and he bounded at the single outlaw with a swiftness that threw the others out.

His only weapon was the knife which he had snatched from the road-agent a few minutes before, so that he had to come to close terms if he wished to do harm.

The fellow in front of him had eyes for nothing but Little Clean Grit.

He had seen the pistol of the boy, and suspected that when the trigger was pulled again more than a simple snap would follow.

He was slackening his pace, and peering around to get a glimpse of the fugitive when the knife landed between his shoulders. Had not Hazen struck a second too soon the blow

would have been instant death. As it was, Hazen felt the blade bite deeply, and had hopes that that one bad man was out of the combat.

Perhaps he was, but he did all the damage that could be asked of him.

Down to the ground he went like a flash, and over him sprawled Harker, who was too close to turn. Then, the knife was kicked out of his hands, and the young man found himself again a prisoner, while one of his captors was none other than the man known as Jolly, and who had already shown such savage hate because of the killing of his pard, Brick.

It was almost the last moment for Hazen.

Over him stood Jolly, his revolver poised, and the few muttered words he spoke showed clearly enough what it was he intended doing.

"Easy with that, Jolly, or let me get out of the way before the job's done. The old man laid down the law to us about him, and I reckon it still goes."

The outlaw with Jolly spoke promptly, and acted more promptly still, for, as he began his caution, he tossed up the muzzle of the weapon by a careless blow, and then stood watching with equal closeness the two.

The lesson was not altogether lost. Jolly held his fire, and growled:

"All right, you. Keep on the trail of the wolf-cub and I'll take this in to camp. The gang are coming and the boss won't want to see you fooling time."

Away darted the fellow, paying no attention to the wounded man. The knife had slashed the latter badly, but he was in no danger of his life.

Captain Kill was not with the crowd that came up, and there was a cheer at sight of the retaken prisoner stepping out toward the camp in front of the muzzle of Jolly's revolver.

At a word from the captor they made no halt, but darted on after Little Clean Grit, while he strode back with the prisoner, his finger on the trigger, and evidently itching to give the pull which would end Harker Hazen's career forever.

Captain Kill had not joined in the pursuit, but was standing moodily by the fire, not far from the spot where he had staggered to his feet. Hazen had hit him the hardest of all, and it took some moments for him to fully recover.

"Ah, you have him, then? As well if you had ended him then and there. I had wanted to save him for another purpose, but the son of Satan won't let me do it. It's expensive, too, unless you do your own work. The last man I had swung off privately I paid a cool hundred for."

"I'll take this job at half the money," retorted Jolly quickly.

"Tie him up hand and foot again, and this time see there's no mistake about it. I'll take your offer into consideration, Jolly, but I'm afraid you wouldn't do the subject justice. It's a thrust and a shot with you, and it's over. I'll want it done a little slower, so it will tell. You can watch him, though, and if there is a chance of his getting away, send him sky-high."

"And there will be fifty in that, besides getting even for my poor pard, Brick?"

"That's the size of it," said Kill, shortly, as he strode away from the spot, leaving Jolly alone with the prisoner, whom they had bound securely and flung back into the wagon.

Jolly glared at the young man viciously.

"Curse you!" he exclaimed, shaking his fist at the brave young fellow.

"I just got back from burying my old pard. I swore then I'd have it out with you, and what the Cap has said lets me out on it. In one way or another I'll send you to glory before the day is over."

Hazen said nothing. The outlaw meant

what he said, and he knew it. The closer he kept his lips, the less likely he was to goad Jolly into proceeding to immediate execution.

But Jolly needed no goading.

All that made him hesitate was an uncertainty as to the exact meaning of the captain.

"Curse him! he said sky-high. Did he mean it? Where he wants him to go is generally supposed to be in the other direction. I'll try it, and run the risk. I think he is getting away now."

From the wagon the scoundrel took out the keg, and removed the plug in one end. From his pocket he drew a piece of fuse which he fixed in the hole, and placed the keg under the wagon. Then he lighted a match, and touched it carefully to the end of the fuse, and the road-bandit smiled like a fiend as he watched the lighted fuse.

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY.

CLEAN GRIT had been deprived of his weapons when made prisoner, and the revolver he had snatched from the belt of the road-agent was by an unlucky fatality unloaded.

Had it been otherwise, it is more than likely he would have done a deal of work with it before he would have become separated from the man who had risked so much in coming to his aid.

He had no idea, however, of entirely deserting Hazen when he sprung away, even though he knew Helen's lover was not following him.

He remembered that when he was captured he had a number of cartridges loose in his pocket, and was pretty sure they had not all been removed. If he could have a moment or two to himself he might recharge the weapon and be ready for successful resistance, while, if he hesitated with these men in front of him, there could only be one ending. He would be again a prisoner.

After disappearing from view he had a few seconds to himself, and he made the most of them. Fortunately, the lay of the land was in his favor, and he was cool enough to take advantage of it.

Before him stretched a natural path, which one in headlong haste, and desirous of getting away from the dangerous locality as soon as possible, would be likely to follow.

Clean Grit did nothing of the kind.

He turned sharply to the right, and ran back toward the outlaw camp, keeping just within the cover until he was sure he had thrown pursuit off the scent.

Then, he halted for a breathing spell, and to search his pockets.

There was an expression of disgust, and something more, on his face as he discovered his pockets had been turned inside out as it were, and that it was only by chance a single cartridge had escaped the search. For a miracle it fitted the revolver in his hand, and he had at least one life to command.

By this time Jolly was escorting Harker Hazen toward the camp, and the young hustler, puzzled as to his best course, stole silently along within easy pistol range, and waiting for an opportunity. He might have shot the outlaw down at any time, but that would have called attention to the spot; and he was not sure how many men remained in the camp.

As a result, he followed on, and was a witness of the interview between Jolly and the chief, and afterward watched the proceedings of the road agent with breathless interest. It was only at the last moment he divined his intentions.

"Good heavens!" muttered the boy as he saw the match applied to the fuse.

"It's too late now to shoot Jolly and make a dive for Harker. Before I could reach him he would go to kingdom never-come-back-again. And if I snuff the fuse my last shot's

gone, and Jolly can have it all his own way. But that last is what has got to be done."

All this passed through the mind of the young hustler like a flash. With a second charge in his revolver he would not have hesitated an instant.

The fuse was spitting and spluttering, and burning rapidly. There was little time to lose; yet, though he held his gun at a ready, Clean Grit hesitated, and shifted his position rapidly and noiselessly.

Then, the barrel dropped into perfect line, and he pulled the trigger. Though Jolly had already placed some distance between himself and the wagon the hustler had him lined with the upturned fuse, and when the bullet sped the fuse dropped, shorn close off to the keg, and there was a howl of dismay from the outlaw, who staggered and then fell with a ball through his leg.

The shot had done its work, but Clean Grit knew it would attract attention to the spot, and that there was no time to lose. Following it up he rushed out and dealt Jolly a blow on the head with his clubbed revolver that effectually placed him out of the game. To transfer his belt to his own waist was but the work of another instant, and then the brave boy was severing the bonds of Hazen.

Then with a bound both were in retreat, and this time there was no one to stop them. Before the outlaws had regained their camp the two were out of sight, running silently but swiftly up the gorge, Little Clean Grit charging his emptied weapon from the ammunition found in Jolly's belt.

"Looks like an infernal shame to leave Sam in the lurch," he panted, as they toiled up a steeply rising slope.

"Wouldn't have done it for a fortune if I had been sure I could have done him any good; but he may have passed in his checks for all I know. Did you catch on to anything about him this morning?"

"Nothing, except that he was still alive, and in much the same condition as last night. That much I happened to hear."

"Then, he is in a mighty bad way, and nothing we could do would help him any. I'm afraid he's elected, but I'll root the matter up soon as I get the chance. A mighty good pard was Sailor Sam."

"Yes, but as we can do him no good, we want to be thinking of ourselves first, last and all the time until we get clear of these demons. How are we to get out of this?"

"Blamed if I know," confessed Clean Grit, looking around him as he spoke.

"Appears as though we were in a trap, with the gang at the other end, waiting with clubs to kill the rats when they turn around and try the door again. They don't follow any too close, that's one thing sure."

"They will get here all the same if we wait for them, and I don't like the way the land looks ahead."

The gorge was rapidly narrowing, and from the glimpse they could get of what lay ahead, it seemed as though their way would soon be blocked entirely.

"I don't, either, and the sooner we try a side issue the better. Here's for it now."

As he spoke Clean Grit turned aside and began an ascent which from the starting point seemed almost impracticable, and which really tested their wind and muscle to the utmost.

Some progress they did make, however, and at last came to a spot which offered them an opportunity for both rest and concealment.

"We called the turn just in time," said the boy, pointing downward.

"If I am not mistaken there is Kill himself, and his gang comes with him. Will they strike the trail? If they do, we must give them the best in the shop. Take this gun, and you don't want to do any wild shooting, either."

Young Hazen took the revolver without

urging, and with bated breath the two peered downward at the indistinctly-seen figures.

"If we only had Winchesters, I'd give them a hail," whispered Clean Grit, after they had watched for a few moments.

The men below were carefully beating over the field, but did not seem to have a suspicion their game would be found on the higher ground to the side.

"The range is too long for these pop-guns, and if they sight us they can either take us at long range, or starve us out. I'd sooner have it quick and lively, and over in a minute; but, I want my chance all the same."

"Not much chance if they sight us here," answered Hazen, staring around.

"We have good cover for a little, but sooner or later they would get a position that would command our flank. They would hardly be so mad as to attempt a straight charge after the sample they have had."

"If they only would; but, as you say, there's not much hope of that, and as we can't go further up without being seen, if we can go at all, we'll lie low."

"Hold on! Are you so certain of that? It looks—yes, there may be a chance."

"You want to hurry and find it, then, for, here they come."

"There is something that looks like a pass through the rocks, up yonder, and if we can reach it we can at least command the approach. They may starve us out, but I'll be hanged if they could take us by force as long as the ammunition held out."

"Lead out, then, I'll follow, and keep the retreat covered. Perhaps, if they do see us going they will hurry up their stumps, and we'll have them at close quarters."

Hazen had made no mistake, for by a little care they could reach the spot which he mentioned with only a momentary exposure, and there was the chance that at the time they passed that point the eyes of the outlaws would not be on it.

They hurried along, Clean Grit keeping a lookout to the rear. The agents were not advancing directly toward the spot they had left but had they remained their discovery would only have been a matter of a few minutes.

As yet the rocks were between the two parties, but there was a gap in the shelter, and then they would be visible to each other.

Harker Hazen passed the gap successfully, and Clean Grit was vanishing when there came the crack of a Winchester and a shout from below.

The boy heard the sharp "hist" of the bullet as it tore along close overhead, and then he was again in comparative safety.

"Hustle along now!" he exclaimed.

"If you know how to make two-ten-and-a-half time try it on."

Hazen needed no second counsel, but scrambled upward, and as he reached the crown of the pass, Clean Grit at his side, a man stood there with the palm of his hand turned toward them as he whispered:

"This way!"

At a glance Clean Grit recognized Poker Pete.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE RED OWLS FORCES HIS HAND.

HELEN FORD had already some experience of the tender mercies of outlaws, and though braver than the average girl was not a little alarmed when the Owls held up the coach.

At the same time, had there been any resistance possible she would have joined in with the rest. Taken at a disadvantage the men did not seem to care to throw their lives away, and she could only hope that since there had been no resistance the bandits would content themselves with rifling

the coach and its passengers, and then go their way.

She carried a revolver, with the use of which she was well acquainted, but did not draw it.

Perhaps the weapon would yet be of service, and till then it was possible its existence would not be suspected.

She watched the leader carefully, for though he was masked she thought she would be able to recognize Captain Kill under any disguise. It was a relief to feel there was not the slightest resemblance between this man and the one she had feared he really was. If this were so she had hopes that it was the treasure alone he was after.

Then, when Clean Grit and the rest came charging toward the coach, and the sudden rout began, she was ready to clap her hands. It all was over but the shouting.

For the moment she was excited and off her guard.

It was just then the leader of the Owls made his spring, and before any resistance could be made she was a prisoner beyond present hope of escape.

The headlong flight was full of terror, and at first Helen Ford tried to scream, but a rough hand over her mouth smothered the voice. While held in such a gripe, to struggle was useless, and she resigned herself to her fate.

After that, coolness came back, and she began to count the chances of rescue, and listened to the sounds of pursuit. Even when that died away in a chorus of pistol-shots she did not despair. It had not been hard to recognize the voice of the boy hustler, and without even asking herself how he came to be there his presence gave her more comfort, even, than she knew.

The flight was a long continued one, though after a little it became orderly enough, and she could understand there was nothing like a panic.

At length, a halt was made, and a camp for the night.

With the first gleam of the camp-fire Helen had a glimpse of the singular masks worn by the men, and they brought to her mind the fact that she had incidentally heard of a gang of outlaws known as the Red Owls, and unless she was decidedly mistaken they were a totally different lot from the men who trained under the lead of Captain Kill.

Bad as they might be, it was something of a relief to know she was not in the hands of the man whom she so deeply hated and feared.

Though unpinioned a guard stood near, with his eyes keenly watching her, and as he held a revolver in his hand a good part of the time it was a fair proof that if she attempted to escape he intended to shoot.

At length, when the preparations for the night had been made, the leader of the Owls returned.

"Glad ter see yer a girl of sense," was his salutation.

"In course, ef thar warn't a chance fur rocks in it we wouldn't hev bin so onpolite ez ter hold up a lady; but, ther fact are, we're out fur coin, an' coin we *must* hev. Thar's money in you, an' I reckon we'll find ther way ter fetch it out. Ef we do you kin be sure you'll be ez safe hyer ez ef you war in a church."

"No money can you make through me, sir," was the bold answer. "If you get anything it will be hard knocks. Our little all was in the treasure, and if you get that we will be poor indeed."

"You say; but mebbe it won't altergether go. We're jest posted clean up on Pay Dirt, an' what comes from thar."

"I have my doubts, or you never would have run the monstrous risk you did this night—that you do now. Ezra Ford may not have gold, but he has lead plenty, and so have his friends."

"That's a daisy bluff, but it wca't win,

not fur a cent. An' ef Ezra won't come ter time, p'raps there'll be a chance to dicker with Kill. Curse him! It looks ez though he had got the first show an' scooped ther deck."

"What has Captain Kill to do with it?" asked Helen, still pursuing the high and mighty line.

"Oh, ez I war tellin' you, we keep posted. When a man like Kill begins to throw away his time after a girl it's a sign he wants her mighty bad. Ef we can't do better we may trade with him. We didn't know tell ter-night he war on ther line, but we got it down on him fine, now, an' we're ready ter trade er fight. I wanted ter give yer a hint thet ver best hold war ter keep still an' wait. Kickin' won't do yer no good, an' may do a heap ov harm."

The fellow was rough of speech, and altogether of a coarser grain than Captain Kill, but Helen was inclined to prefer him to the other. He was respectful after his fashion, and seemed to think he had hold of a valuable article, which was to be handled carefully. When he went away he nodded in a manner intended to be reassuring, and left the young lady more hopeful than he suspected. While he was waiting to come to terms with Kill, she had reason to believe her friends would be doing something to effect her rescue."

She was thinking over the chances of the pursuit which certainly would be made when there was a sudden commotion in the camp. At some little distance still, but approaching at what was evidently a headlong gallop, some one was coming in spite of himself.

"Whoa, there! Whoop! Dog-gone ye!"

Three or four times over was this repeated, with additions and emendations that became less and less pious the nearer the owner of 'the voice approached. He was having some trouble with his steed, and if not frightened was a good deal nervous, to say nothing of his being in a howling fury.

It did not take long for the individual to come into sight.

He was bent forward, with his arms clasped around the neck of the pony he bestrode, while the animal, evidently wild with fright, was plunging straight forward, without regard to what might be in front of him.

It was plain as long as the rider retained that position he was not likely to prove dangerous, and though two or three revolvers flew up when he came into sight none of them were discharged.

Instead, several outlaws leaped nimbly out of the way to keep from being run down, while as many more broke into a laugh at the ludicrousness of the whole thing.

It was only for an instant the exhibition lasted, for the broncho dashed madly on past the glare of the fire, and the next moment halted with a suddenness that would have unseated the prince of horse-breakers. In front of him rose an almost perpendicular bank, and he saw it just in time to set every hoof firmly, and go plowing up the ground for several rods until his nose fairly touched the sod.

When he became stationary there was a huddled heap of boy humanity between his front legs, for his rider had shot over his head as though discharged from a catapult, and come down with a thud that would have meant a mangled body for any one but an average boy.

One of the outlaws caught the animal, which stood trembling and subdued, while another hauled the bundle out from its resting-place, to get a better idea of the meaning of it all.

"Neck broke, sure enough," he said, looking up, with the limp figure hanging over his arm.

"W'ot in thunder war ther fool cuss tryin' ter do?"

"Bet yer two ter one he begins ter wiggle in less ner two minnits by ther clock."

"Done!" said the first speaker as he dropped the boy, and laid his hand on his revolver.

"It's all right fur me, but it's a blamed on-healthy bet fur ther boy."

"Don't yer try it, Jack. I got yer lined, an' ef you throw foul ter win that bet I'll play yer exec'uter an' handle ther ef-fecks."

With a quick turn of his wrist the second speaker had thrown up the muzzle of his pistol and covered the fellow who had professed to believe he was betting on a sure think.

"An' I'm a-backin' yer hand, pard!" exclaimed the boy, suddenly sitting bolt upright.

"Ef ther blamed nocky-boy hed kept his whids stowed I'd 'a' layed thar five minnits ter git through with my blushin', an' ef you ain't able fur him I'm takin' a hand in, sure ez my name's Move-along Mike."

He slung out his fire-arms with a readiness that was wonderful for one with a broken neck, and the laughter that arose from those who were crowding near told they considered him very much alive.

It was sport for them, but it might have been death for Mike had the captain not moved up with the rest.

"Stiddy, thar, you Jack! I cain't spare you. An' you, lad, turn over them guns er it'll go bad with yer. What in high thunder brought yer hyer?"

"That dog-rotted hoody-doodo ov a prad. First off, I war skeered an' wanted ter cut my lucky, an' then he got skeered, vamosed, an' hyer we be."

As he spoke, with the utmost nonchalance Mike placed his pistols in the captain's hands.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT HARK HAZEN FOUND.

It was well for Poker Pete he was so quickly recognized, because before his body came into sight Clean Grit had his head lined, and at the first suspicious movement was ready to pull the trigger.

As it was, he did not abate much of his vigilance, since there was no knowing what was to follow.

Of course he did not hesitate to advance, for though the outlaws might feel their way a little, and be loth to expose themselves to his sure-shooting revolver, yet sooner or later they would find their game escaping, and move up with a rush to get to close quarters.

"And Peter came also," laughed the boy as he darted into the pass, and felt for the moment comparatively safe.

"If it is fun you like, hyer it is by the great bucket full. Been a-wondering why you lingered, and half thought they had taken you in out of the wet last night."

"Not fur Pete! He knowed when it war time ter draw off; an' when ter come ag'in. Ef I'd 'a' stood on me car jest then it wouldn't 'a' done me a bit ov good, an' would 'a' give them a good reason ter kill you. This way I saved ther cayceuses, an' you orter 'a' got a good look at the'r camp. See ary thing ov ther purty damsel down thar?"

"Nary thing. This is another gang, and we got no business with them except to be getting out of the way fast as we can. They have it in for us large, but I wouldn't weep if we never saw them again."

"Then, thar's on'y one thing fer us ter be doin', an' that's ter take ther trail ag'in frum ther hearse. We can't strike no sign racketing around hyer, an' thar we might hit trail ef they come back on it, ez they will. This a side pard ov yourn?"

He looked sharply at Harker Hazen, and seemed to be debating whether the stranger could be trusted or not.

"That's what I call him, and a good young

man he is to tie to. As for the other hearse, this is the gang that held it up, and they have Sailor Sam down there now, but nary a treasure did they get. There has been a game of some kind played, and it strikes me Sam and the men of Pay Dirt have been too sharp for their own comfort."

"Wal, kim along while those gerloots are willin' ter hold off. We'll git to ther bronchos fu'st off, an' chin arterward. Yer pard hed better kim too, but he'll hev ter take it footback. He looks ez though he could travel, an' mebbe we'll pick up s'uthin' fur him."

Unless they intended to remain for a fight it was time, they were thinking of retreat. The outlaws would not wait much longer, and though the three could hold off successfully all those in sight they had no desire to fight for the fun of the thing.

They passed along through the narrow cut in the crest of the mountain, and then down the first sharply precipitous descent on the other side.

The bronchos were gathered where Pete had left them, and without wasting time the two swung into the saddle, while Hazen took his place by the side of the boy hustler.

Now they were ready to move the advice of Pete began to look more reasonable to the boy.

Since the Killers had made their appearance it would be difficult to separate their trail from that of the Red Owls, and it was likely they might scout around at large for a long while before they would happen across any of the latter whom they could recognize. If Helen was held for ransom it might be possible to trace her through the messenger who was sent to announce the fact, but meantime with Captain Kill and his men as a disturbing element, the force was too large and too small.

Clean Grit would soon have been on the trail alone. So far he had not a chance to explain to Hazen what had happened, but expected to be questioned shortly, and was not mistaken. Enough had been said to make the man curious, and briefly but without any concealment the boy hustler told him all.

To a lover the position seemed terrible enough, but Harker Hazen had seen Helen Ford rescued once from the hands of outlaws, and had full hope that it could be done again.

"We are too few to rescue and too many to find," was the response.

"I believe Captain Kill will do us good service now, since he will start upon the trail of Helen himself. You too can seek aid, while I will remain as a spy upon the outlaws. If they take me they can but kill me, and I will die near Helen."

"You're a hummin' bird, you be!" averred Pete, heartily; "an' yer talk's ther kind I like ter hear. Hyer you kin do good, an' ef yer kim along you'll be a hinderin'. Keep yer eyes wide ope an' it's a chance yer do ther trick."

"And at the same time you may be doing something for Sam," added Clean Grit. "What I'm afraid of is that if he don't go over the divide of himself the infernal wolves will either knock him in the head, or leave him there to die when they break camp. Oh, we have a heap of things to look after, and as I don't see where it is best to begin, perhaps the best thing to do is to follow Pete's lead, and take a new base. Have it as you want, pards, and I'll never whimper."

With a few words of parting caution the two moved away, leaving Harker Hazen to his own devices.

It was not so sure the young man was not in great danger, for it would not be hard for the outlaws to follow on his trail, but he was willing to run any and all risks, and without any haste or excitement he glided away from

the spot, following a course he had mapped out from Poker Pete's hasty description of the lay of the land.

Fortunately, as it seemed, the nature of the ground changed somewhat, and before he had gone far he deflected from the course he had been pursuing enough to throw any one who had been following off of his track. He had a tramp of some miles before him, for he was aiming to strike the mouth of the gorge in which Captain Kill had located his camp.

Nothing was heard of the outlaws in his rear, and eventually he reached a spot which seemed expressly created for his occupancy.

Certainly, the Killers would never think of looking for him there, and there was little danger of his being discovered by chance alone.

He lay hidden for some hours. There was nothing to be seen or heard of a living soul, and it began to look as though the gorge had been evacuated. At one time he almost thought of giving up his watch.

But, call it guess-work or presentiment, he had an idea he was to learn something here as to the fate of Helen, and decided he would not leave the spot, though sorely tempted to explore the ground, and see if by any chance the outlaws had moved their camp. When he became thoroughly nervous, and almost convinced his watch was a piece of folly, three men came out of the gorge, and moved leisurely away.

They had some particular point in view, for they were never at a loss, and after they had proceeded far enough to make it safe, Hazen struck into their trail. He could stand the inaction no longer, and though neither of the men was Captain Kill it was barely possible they might help him locate the camp of the Red Owls.

They were evidently on a mission of some kind, and young Hazen could think of nothing but Ezra Ford's daughter.

It was no light task to follow, just far enough away to escape detection, and not so far away as to be left behind. Had not the lay of the land been in his favor he would not have been as successful as he was.

From time to time he dodged under cover and remained motionless while they passed some point from which their chance of seeing him was better than common. After each of these halts he had a run to recover the lost ground. He had forgotten altogether that there was a possibility of there being some one on his own trail, and exposed himself recklessly from the rear.

Yet, danger did not overtake him from that direction.

As he darted into one of these covers his feet tripped over something, he did not at once know what, and he fell at full length to the ground.

The fall was a hard one, but there was more to follow. Something dropped on him, nearly squelching the breath out of his body, and before he could make an effort a rough hand was slipped over his mouth, while a low voice grated into his ear:

"Not a whisper! Thar's a gun borin' inter ther back ov yer neck, an' ef ther hez ter be a noise it'll be that they're a hearin' bark. It'll be all ther same ter me, an' a heap-sight w'uss fur you."

An outcry could not save him, and resistance was impossible, so Hazen lay still. Unless the chances were altogether against him he did not intend to tamely submit, yet, until he knew better into whose hands he had fallen, he was willing to make the best of a bad predicament.

For some moments he lay there, the knee of his captor grinding into his back, though the hand was withdrawn from over his mouth. When the men he had been following had abundant time to get out of sight the knee was withdrawn, and the same harsh voice, at a somewhat louder pitch, rasped out:

"Now, cully, git yerself up in shape.

Jest cross them hands behind yer back, an' don't try ter monkey with yer boss er there'll be dead meat fur breakfast."

The cold steel was still against his neck, and Hazen thought it best to obey orders.

As his wrists met a cord was skillfully knotted around them. Then, a cloth was fastened over his eyes, and he was told to get up.

"I'm goin' ter try ter take yer inter camp, young man, an' it may be rough on you, but you better make a go ov it. I don't want ter slaughter, but it looks ez though that's what it'll come to ef you don't git a move on. I'll steer, an' you walk mighty straight."

Guided by the hand of the fellow, whoever he might be, Harker Hazen attempted to move off.

CHAPTER XIV.

AGAIN UNMASKED.

"DIDN'T see any of the rest of the boys lying around loose, did you?" asked Little Clean Grit, as he moved away from the spot where they left Harker Hazen.

"If I picked up any of the rights of the thing, they must have been left somewhere about where we struck Sailor Sam."

"Didn't see ary thing ov 'em, an' it's fu'st time I knowed thet it war Sam ez brung you inter ther trouble. Ef yer wants ter hev me do full jestic ez a pard, yer better give me all ther p'int. What war Sam doin' round thar, anyhow?" asked Pete.

"You can't prove it by me. Kill wanted to have that same question answered, and wouldn't believe me when I said I didn't know any more about Sam's business than he did. Wanted to burn the secret out of me. Would have wound up with a regular barbecue if it hadn't been for Hazen."

"Oh, come, now. Kill ain't a nat'ral born fool, an' he wouldn't hev so sot on it ef thar warn't s'uthin' ter set him a-goin'. You kin open up ter me. Pay Dirt knows Poker Pete, an' 'll say it ain't afeared ter trust him."

"Neither am I, Peter; but the fact is, I've nothing to say. I suspect Sam tried to tell me something about the treasure and the coach, but I didn't catch onto it if he did. The Killers came a little too soon."

"That's jest ther idear. Wot *did* he say? Praps I kin make a tail outen it ef you kin gi'mme ther head."

"No head nor tail, no hide nor hoof, can I give you. I'm a dry well, as far as that goes. I'm more interested in finding the trail of the boys and doing something for Miss Helen. It's a tough contract; but I'll carry it through or something will drop."

They had been going at a steady but rapid gait, keeping side by side since they started, but at this moment, through an almost imperceptible slackening of speed, the broncho ridden by Poker Pete dropped a trifle behind in its position.

The movement excited no suspicion in the mind of the boy hustler, but as he spoke he glanced over his shoulder, and so caught a change in the gambler's countenance which was never intended for his eyes, and he saw Pete's hand drop to his revolver.

In that glance there was a whole revelation, and with a quick movement Clean Grit flung himself forward and to one side, at the same time that the man spoke.

"Curse you! you know me now, do you? I thought you could give me the pointer, but if fire nor friend can draw it, there's nothing left you to live for. Die!"

His pistol was rising, but the savage hate in the disguised Captain Kill's tones, told why he had lingered a trifle too long on his aim. He did not see the revolver Clean Grit had drawn from his boot as he flung himself forward, nor the muzzle of it as it came up under the neck of the perfectly-trained broncho. He thrust back the hammer of his own weapon, and at that moment Clean Grit's little gun spoke.

The horse of the well-disguised outlaw swerved, wheeled, and then darted along the almost imperceptible trail by which it had come.

Now, however, the positions were reversed. Captain Kill was lying with his arms clasped around the neck of his broncho, while Clean Grit sat upright, the smoking-weapon in his hand, ready for a second shot. He wheeled his own horse, and followed in eager pursuit, yet on the lookout for treachery or surprise.

Kill had already a fair start, and the boy hustler was too wise to risk throwing away ammunition on such an uncertain mark. It was too precious for that.

Besides, though he had taken the shot without aim, he believed the man was badly wounded, and expected to see his arms loosen, and a nerveless body drop to the ground.

"After that," thought the boy, as he dashed along, "I'll believe 'most any thing. To think Pay Dirt never dropped to the fraud, and that he could ring all th changes on it. If there had been a meeting-house and a court-room there I'd not be sure he hadn't been playing judge and gospel sharp as well till I got my eyes on them all together. There is one thing scandalously certain, though. He has the best mount."

So it seemed to be, for the other broncho, though unassisted by its rider, was forging ahead, and it began to look as though overtaking the outlaw was something chance would have to do with, if done it was.

There was a strong probability of running against some of the men at any moment, and if Clean Grit fell into their hands now he would be a fool if he did not know what to expect.

At length, he saw a motion in the frame of the clinging man, and gradually he rose to an erect position in the saddle, shaking his head as though trying to throw off his bewilderment.

A few strides more and the outlaw was himself again. He felt of his head, and dashed aside the blood from the spot where the bullet had creased him. As yet he had not checked the flight of his broncho, but he glanced back over his shoulder to see if he was being followed.

In that hasty look he saw nothing of Clean Grit, for upon noting Kill was recovering his wits the boy had drawn aside his horse, and hastily taken to cover. Though it would be risky work attempting to dog the steps of the captain from on horseback, yet there was a chance of success and the boy hustler intended to try it.

Probably Kill thought the boy had been only too glad to be relieved of his presence, for he seemed to take it for granted, after the one look, that he had not been followed. He stared around him, seemed to recognize landmarks he was in search of, and finally, moderated his speed.

Clean Grit was at some distance yet, and now proceeded more cautiously than ever. When Captain Kill halted he was fortunately well concealed, yet could see what was going on in the distance. A man came out of the mesquites, and pointing downward at the land which lay below spoke for a moment in what was apparently from his actions a low tone.

Whatever he said the captain appeared to be well-pleased. He nodded to the man, drew from his pocket a white handkerchief, looked at it reflectively, and then, with a word and a nod to his companion, once more moved forward, but more cautiously than ever.

"There's something in the wind, but if I want to see what it is I'll have to go mighty slow," thought the boy.

"When men begin to get up out of the ground there's no telling how soon they will come a-shooting. Go slow, young man, and you'll get there all the sooner. If I didn't

have an idea that I will have to make a run for it soon I'd *cache* this horseflesh and try it footback."

Nevertheless, he worked his way along without closing up, yet keeping for the most part within sight, and finally, well hidden though he was from any chance observation, looked down into a long, narrow valley, where there was something going on that had a thrilling interest.

Nearly on the other side of the valley, and at rather more than long-range rifle-shot away, a clump of men had halted, and all were looking across, as though they might have sighted Clean Grit himself, though he knew that was not the case.

Not far from where he lay hidden, the valley narrowed abruptly until it was not more than good pistol range across, while directly in front of him was the only practicable slope in view.

Along the higher ground were scattered a number of men whom Clean Grit decided at a glance belonged to the Killers, and they evidently intended to command both ways of egress, while a little further down Captain Kill himself, on foot, and alone, was striding boldly in the direction of the men beyond. In his hand he upheld the white handkerchief the hustler had seen him draw from his pocket.

"Dollars to dimes those fellows over there are the Red Owls!" mentally exclaimed Clean Grit. "If they are you want to be ready for something else. It's what I have been looking for all along, though I didn't expect to see it. Kill thinks he has them in a box, and wants to trade—and I'll wager at half price. There will be fun amazing before this thing is done and over."

The band of Red Owls it was, and when Captain Kill halted near the center of the valley, one of their number stepped forward and after a hasty glance around went to meet him.

The men had no great love for each other, if appearances could be trusted.

They stood a little distance apart, watching each other like hawks. There was a good deal of pantomime about the conference, and Clean Grit thought he could almost follow the course of their conversation through their gestures.

It took time for them to come to anything like an agreement, and it was not until Captain Kill drew from his breast a wallet, and held up what the boy supposed to be a sheaf of notes, that the leader of the Owls appeared to be satisfied.

At sight of that he nodded, and leaving Kill standing there went hastily back to his Owls.

There he held a brief conference, and then returned.

This time, however, he did not come alone, for with him he brought Helen Ford!

Though he had been expecting it, Clean Grit started when he first recognized the girl, and leaned forward in breathless eagerness. He knew there would be something startling for the next scene.

He was right, for, as they came closer, Kill suddenly thrust away the notes and covered the other outlaw with the revolver in one hand while with the other he menaced Helen Ford.

CHAPTER XV.

IT THUNDERS ALL AROUND.

A VERY shrewd move it was, too.

The Red Owls could see at a glance that if they should interfere it would result in the killing of their captain, while the men of Captain Kill could arrive on the spot as soon as themselves. The numbers on each side were so nearly equal that in a fight on the open plain it was no sure thing which side would win; and the prospective gain was so uncertain at the best, it was not likely many risks would be run for it.

With the drop on him, and no one to come to his aid, there was nothing for the captain of the Red Owls to do but to submit to the terms of the other, though he did not like to be too prompt about it. As long as the band of Killers did not make an advance movement he was willing to temporize.

At the last moment something might turn up in his favor.

Something did turn up, but it was not by any means what he expected.

Mounted on one horse, a man and a boy came shooting across the valley. They had struck out from the cover on the further edge, at some distance beyond where the Red Owls were gathered, and their movement was not seen by them, since all eyes were riveted on the scene in front of them.

Straight as an arrow the animal bestridden by the two darted toward the spot where stood the chiefs, with Helen between them, and yet the Killers, too, were slow to note.

Then, suddenly waking up to the fact that there was going to be some new hands in the game, the Killers burst out from their semi-concealment, and came charging down the slope, while the Red Owls hesitated no longer, but darted out to meet them.

Both parties were making good time, and the distance was not far. If there had been the least hesitation the man and the boy—who happened, of course, to be Move-along Mike and Harker Hazen—would have been caught between the two lines and crushed.

But they were in an earnest haste which admitted of no delay. As they rode up, Captain Kill shifted the aim of the pistol with which he had been covering Helen, and would have brought it to bear on young Hazen. He did not see the boy, who, an instant before, had slipped off from behind, but he felt his presence in a way that was unexpected and somewhat painful.

Down came a cudgel upon his outstretched arm, and the pistol which was about to line Helen rolled into the dust.

There was no time to stoop for it.

"Amputate your mahogany!" shouted Mike. "Get out ov ther push! It's goin' ter be dusty hyer, an' we've no use fur you."

He caught Helen by the arm, and was drawing her away toward Hazen. If they could get her on the horse, which the two had stolen from the Red Owls when they made their escape, a short time before, there might be a chance for her to get away, and in the fight which Mike saw was coming, or ought to come, he might pass unnoticed.

Perhaps Helen was excited too badly to recognize her lover. She pulled away from Mike, and wheeling, darted down the valley between the two rapidly closing lines of outlaws.

The movement had its use, wild though it was.

With both parties anxious to hold the girl prisoner, each hesitated to fire, and while they thundered closer some one else took a hand in the game.

Clean Grit had seen the move of his two pards, and was not going to stay out of the circus.

He gave the rein to his broncho, and came down the slope like a whirlwind. When Helen broke from the grasp of Move-along Mike he was not far behind, and it was his voice which a moment later caused all her coolness to come back to her.

"Steady, little woman!" he called, holding his horse well in hand. "Give a spring when I catch you and I'll try to pick you up. I think we can make the rifle."

She recognized the voice of the boy hustler, and halting at once, stood expectant. He had tried such feats before, but was uncertain how far Helen would aid him, or hinder. Had it not been for that he would not have had a doubt.

Tightly gripping the saddle with his knees he bent low, extending his arm, and just at the right moment she sprang to meet him.

There was a heave, and something of a scramble.

Then, Clean Grit was away, with Helen on the saddle in front of him!

"If they join in to take us, and fight afterward, I don't know that we'll have much show; but we're light-weights, and for a while we can hold our own with the best of them. Keep your head low, an' we'll soon find out which way the bullets are going to fly."

"But Harker, and that other lad?" gasped Helen, looking back over the shoulder of her young rescuer. "They have risked all to save me; we dare not, we must not leave them."

"I noticed you were pulling out fast enough," retorted Clean Grit, who was not averse to almost anything to keep Helen's wits about her.

"Harker is of age, and must be governed according. As for my pard—you shoot him from a twenty-four inch mortar and he would light right side up and ready to fight. Don't worry about them. We're the poultry the infernal wolves have set their hearts on having, and if they can't slip clear in the racket they ought to go up the flume."

There was a rattle of firearms which nearly drowned his words, and Clean Grit could not help looking back over his shoulder.

Mike was stretched at full length on the ground, as motionless as a corpse, but somehow Clean Grit did not think he was very dead. Hazen was seeking the very cover where the boy hustler had been concealed; and the two chiefs were falling back on their men. When the apple of discord was snatched away from them they had something more important to think about than their differences.

Such an exciting time would hardly have been complete without the crash of firearms, and that had begun. First, a shot or two had been aimed at Clean Grit, and at the distance it scarcely seemed likely they would miss. The hiss of the bullets showed the lead had come perilously near, but no blood was drawn, and then, from the other side there was an answer, which was directed at the fugitives.

After that, the battle was joined, and just in time for the two in flight. They were by no means out of danger, but attention was drawn from them, the two gangs of pursuers slackened their speed somewhat, to be ready for each other, and out from the double row of would-be captors the boy rode, with at last a fair start and plenty of hope.

There was no time now to pick his course. He saw the ground before him was open and smooth, and followed the trend of the valley, uncertain where it was going to lead him. He could see a long distance ahead, and though it narrowed in the distance he was not concerned for that. He hoped to find a path out of it before he had gone far, and if he could not shake off his pursuers perhaps he would have to cast his mount adrift and stand at bay, if he could not find a place for concealment.

Such an opening as he had hoped for did appear, but it was rather sooner than he wanted to find it, for there were two or three mounted men who were holding their own, if they were not closing up. Clean Grit might have passed it had it not been for a ringing hail.

"Ahoy, there! Clean Grit ahoy! Run under my guns and I'll make the bloody land spiders sheer off."

The voice was familiar, but Clean Grit could hardly believe his senses. He had been so sure Sailor Sam was either dead or dying, to have him appear here, full of life and fight, was a shock.

But, Clean Grit was used to shocks. His life had been full of them.

Without hesitation he swung sharply around to the left, and glancing upward saw

Sailor Sam himself, with a Winchester in his hands, perched on the crown of the bank, some twenty feet above.

"I don't know much about his shooting," thought the boy, as he flitted by, "but I hope it's gilt-edged. He has the nerve, though, and just now I shouldn't wonder if that was worth more than the other."

The crack of the Winchester put an end to his thoughts in that direction. He felt like stopping to take a hand in the fray Sam seemed about starting, but a glance at the white face near to his shoulder made him only grit his teeth and urge his steed on the harder.

Yet, he looked backward, his revolver in his hand, and caught a glimpse of a mustang tumbling to Sam's first shot; and while he looked, heard a second shot, and saw another flinch and swerve.

"Good boy! He has them. If he can't shoot the pigeon he hits the buzzard, and that is doing the business up as well. I'll save my own shots for close quarters. Samuel keeps on pumping lead; and I hope the chargers will continue to drop."

The rattle of hoofs ceased in his rear, and when Clean Grit looked around again he saw that pursuit for the present was indeed checked. Sailor Sam had finished his work, and was making long strides to the rear.

"Are we safe?" whispered Helen, at last, when Clean Grit slackened his speed and began to look about him.

"We're safe, of course," was the encouraging answer; "but I'm not so sure about the poor road-agents. Seems as though they had been having a wintry time. We won't wait to see, though. It looks as though this route might lead to the trail, and we'll just hustle on ahead. I wouldn't weep a tear if we could strike some of the men from Pay Dirt. We'll need 'em bad before we get through."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PARDS "GET THE HUSTLE ON."

CLEAN GRIT had wonderful nerve, to be sure, but he had luck as well, without which he might have lost his life at a dozen different times during the brief period which had elapsed since he struck the camp of Pay Dirt.

Although he was shrewd to trace out the lay of the land, and did not take his course altogether at a venture, luck had a great deal to do with his striking at last the very spot where he had stumbled across Sailor Sam in the darkness, and had himself been captured.

Though he had come to the spot originally in utter darkness he had no trouble in recognizing it, for the hoofmarks were there, and a little splotch of dried blood, where the head of the storekeeper had been resting when Clean Grit raised it.

"That hits us right where we live," he exclaimed, pointing downward to the marks which were so plain to his eyes.

"The wagon trail can't be so far off now, and if I can't find it, my mother's darling ought to have a guardian appointed, and wear skirliloons. Chirk up, Miss Helen, we are just as good as out of the woods."

"But, with all our friends scattered, and we here alone, what good will it do us if we find the trail?"

"What good? Glory! That's a question. If we can't do any better we can strike back to Pay Dirt, and take a fresh start. By this time your dad has woke them up there, and I wouldn't wonder if we met half the town coming to the rescue."

"But if I understand you aright they will never look for us on this trail. It will be the other one they will take to find traces of us, and we will miss them."

"Not so sure of that if there is any one in Pay Dirt who knows what Sam was trying to tell me when I stumbled across him. They will begin to think Kill has his suspicions and will try this route over again—if he

hadn't been wasting his time with you and me he would have been hyer or hyerabouts before this—and Kill is the man they will want to meet."

"And the man we wish to avoid," said Helen, with a shiver. "Can we not go in some other direction?"

"We are doing very well as it is, and I wouldn't lose my bearings on the chance of meeting a dozen Doctor Hanshaws, with a smart sprinkling of Drunken Davys, and Poker Petes thrown in. I think we are ahead of the procession, and we'll try and stay there."

Clean Grit had not forgotten his friends, by any means, but first of all he wanted to get Helen Ford off his hands. After that he could look for them at his leisure.

He could understand that Helen was nervous and weary, needing rest badly, but there was no time to waste, and without attempting to further reassure her he turned down the gorge, and soon had the satisfaction of knowing he was on the right track. Before he expected it he found himself in the trail.

The broncho had stood up nobly to its work, but after a time began to show symptoms of leg-weariness. To relieve him a little Clean Grit slid from the saddle, and walked by his side, leaving Helen to hold the reins. They were coming to the difficult portion of the road near to where the coach which carried Sailor Sam had been stopped.

Suddenly, the boy laid his hand on the bridle.

"Whoa! And say it as softly as you know how. Strikes me I caught a glimpse of something in the distance. Come out of the trail and let me go on and investigate. There's nothing to be lost just now by being a trifle over careful. It may be a rabbit, it may be a Red Owl, and it may be Captain Kill, himself. I want to know which before you go any further."

At the approach again, of what might be danger Helen grew, if possible, a little paler, but she shut her teeth hard, uttered no sound, and allowed the broncho to be led aside from the track. Leaving the young lady there, in comparative concealment, Clean Grit glided away, keeping an anxious eye on the spot where he thought he had seen a moving object.

With their superior knowledge of the country it was possible enough the outlaws had cut in before him, but he wanted to know in what force they came before he decided what was the best for him to do.

He had never been over the ground before, but without the least hesitation he followed an ascending course, which was bringing him to the spot where were the ambushed Killers when the stage was stopped by their comrades below.

There were sharp eyes on the lookout, but fortunately they were directed up and down the trail. Half a dozen of the Killers were there, and foremost among them Captain Kill was scrambling down the bank, toward the ruins of the coach which were to be seen below.

"The treasure left Pay Dirt, that I'll swear to," Clean Grit heard him saying. "There was a trick of some kind, that was sharp enough to fool the Red Owls as well as us, but we'll go them one better and win, after all. If the wretches have not been here—"

He stopped speaking, and looked down upon the shattered fragments at his feet. Bad as was the wreck it had been impossible to take the whole coach apart. Part of it still retained its shape. Snatching up a wheel that had been torn from the axle, Captain Kill raised it high in air, and hurled it down upon the still solid bottom of the coach.

"By heavens! He's struck the secret!" thought Clean Grit, and he was not far wrong.

With the crash the flooring was burst

apart, revealing the fact there was a double bottom to the coach, and in the cavity had been placed a number of small, narrow boxes, so carefully packed they filled the interior completely.

"Hooray! Hooray fur—"

Kill threw up his finger, and it quieted the man as quickly as though it had been a steel tube with certain death within.

"If it was not for the noise it would make I would have struck you with something harder. Lay hold, but be silent."

There was load enough there for a number of men, divided up as it was in awkward packages. They moved up with outstretched arms. Even the sentinel on the road forgot his duty and craned forward to see the treasure that at last was within their grasp.

Now was Little Clean Grit's opportunity.

The odds against him were fearful, but he never hesitated. If he could not entirely baffle he knew he could delay, and render a good account of himself in the doing of it. The range for pistol-shooting was a little long, but he still had five lives or limbs at his finger ends, and he began to make his tally.

Captain Kill was screened by the man who stood next to him or he would have fallen first of all, but the outlaw in front went down with an angry cry. Then followed shot after shot, as fast as thumb could work hammer, and finger press trigger.

The reports sounded like a fire by file of a platoon of cavalry, and every bullet had its billet. If they did not kill they crippled, and that, for the boy, was just as well.

But, five shots were soon spent.

Captain Kill, with his left arm hanging shattered by his side, looked upward and saw the young camp hustler leaning eagerly forward from his covert, uncertain whether to charge down to snatch at the arms of the sentinel who lay on the trail, or to take to flight. If the outlaws were not altogether demoralized there were still enough standing to take terrible vengeance; and there was the safety of Helen as well as his own at stake.

Kill threw up his hand, and the muzzle of his revolver never wavered.

Clean Grit saw the movement, and was fixed to the spot for an instant as though fascinated. He knew the deadly aim of the man, and thought his hour had come.

And then, along the trail came the sweep and swoop of beating hoofs, and Move-along Mike, bouncing a foot high at every stride, was on the ground.

He never waited to draw in his steed, but as he reached the spot where the sentinel lay, he just rolled off his horse, and rose again with a revolver ready for Captain Kill.

At the sound Kill had held his shot. He knew the boy above was no longer dangerous, and it was possible the fight for life would have to go on.

As he raised his gun the coming warrior seemed taller than a man. As the pistol cracked, Mike was settling into his saddle from a bounce, and seemed smaller than a boy. The bullet went whistling just over his head.

When he staggered to his feet he pulled trigger, and Kill went down, while with a loud cheer a dozen men of Pay Dirt came swooping down upon the scene!

—

This time it *was* all over but the shouting.

The Red Owls had been beaten off by the Killers, and Mike had as usual fallen on his feet. When he had lain for a time apparently dead, he had risen unmolested, captured a steed belonging to one of the fallen Owls, and followed the trail left behind by the Killers as they went back to investigate the shattered coach.

He had come up just in time to save his pard, and hold things in shape till the men

of Pay Dirt, with whom came Ezra Ford, could finish the clean up.

He had passed Harker Hazen on the way, and it was not hard to find the young man, while Sailor Sam turned up, very much alive, and none the worse for the deep crease which had for a time befuddled his brain.

There was little danger the Red Owls would rally for another attack, while—dead or wounded—the Killers were pretty much all in hand. Captain Kill was twice wounded; but, life was hard to kill in him who was so handy at killing others, and there was every chance he would live to receive due punishment.

To make sure of it, when the second coach was brought around to receive the Fords and the treasure, the outlaw captain was loaded on top, and the whole delegation from Pay Dirt went with it to make sure he was safely delivered into the hands of those who would properly attend to the business.

And with them all the boy hustler and his pard went; the clean-up was complete.

THE END.

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